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THE SETTLEMENT OF NEW CALEDONIA OVERVIEW ON A LONG-POLITICIZED ISSUE

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I. GENERAL CONTEXT

An understanding of the settlement of New Caledonia can only be reached by placing it within the historical context of the discovery, by *Homo sapiens*, of a region known as “Remote Oceania”¹ located beyond, i.e. to the east of, the Solomon Islands.

“Near Oceania”, mainly comprising Australia, Tasmania and mainland New Guinea, was settled in the late Pleistocene period, several tens of thousands of years ago, by the ancestors of groups from present-day Australia and Papua, as a result of the Würm glaciation. During this phase, when sea levels were around one hundred metres lower, large conjoined masses of emerged land replaced the highly fragmented region of present-day insular Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, in order to cross small-but-deep channels, some tens of kilometres wide, makeshift boats had to be built, representing a remarkable technical achievement for Paleolithic Age peoples; however, the vast majority of population movements within these areas were made on foot.

In Remote Oceania, by contrast, the process of settlement could only take place by sea, through a mastery of highly sophisticated navigation and boatbuilding techniques. The peoples driving this far-flung expansion came from Asia, from a region which could be equated with present-day Taiwan or the South of mainland China. The first outrigger canoes are thought to have set off southwards and eastwards from there, heading first towards the Philippines and Micronesia, and then onto insular Southeast Asia and the mainland of New Guinea. These Austronesian language-speaking peoples would have spread across present-day Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula, and even distant Madagascar, and would also have come into contact with Papuan peoples who had settled at an earlier date in the Bismarck Sea area. The present Bismarck Archipelago, including the large island groups of New Britain and New Ireland, Manus and also many other islands, is considered to be the melting pot of a cultural or civilizational complex which then spread to Melanesia and Western Polynesia, exploring for the first time the large, entirely unknown, islands of the southwest Pacific.

¹ Term defined by the archaeologist R. C. Green and the linguist Andrew Pawley. For considerations specific to the concept of Melanesia, see R.C. Green, 1991, “Near and Remote Oceania – Disestablishing ‘Melanesia’ in Culture History”, in A. Pawley, *Man and a Half: Essays in Pacific Anthropology and Ethnobiology in Honour of Ralph Bulmer*. Auckland, Polynesian Society, p. 491-502.

This cultural complex is known as “Lapita”, taking its name from a site in New Caledonia. Discovered in the early 20th century by Fritz Sarasin and Maurice Piroutet, this site, linked to the first settlement in New Caledonia – and close to the present urban area of Koné –, was excavated in 1952 by an American archaeological expedition led by Edward W. Gifford, Richard Shutler Jr. and Mary Elizabeth Shutler. The excavations at Lapita, undertaken in the early days of radiocarbon dating, provided evidence of the antiquity of settlements in Melanesia – dating back several millennia – and also demonstrated the cultural unity existing in the distant past when the islands were first discovered. Indeed, similar pottery sherds were also coming to light in Fiji, New Britain, and in other places in New Caledonia. The idea of a maritime cultural complex, showing great homogeneity in, at least, the production of pottery, and having fairly rapidly settled insular Oceania starting from the western Pacific, was beginning to make sense.

In fact, linguists had long been aware of the links between some Southeast Asian languages (Malay, Tagalog, Formosan) and Polynesian languages. Research into Kanak languages by André-Georges Haudricourt and his students resulted in these languages being included in the vast family of Austronesian languages, thus affirming the cultural and linguistic unity of the Oceanian peoples. Moreover, the Asian origin of many plants eaten in Oceania, including taro (*Colocasia esculenta*, together with *Cyrtosperma* sp. and *Alocasia* sp.), bananas (*Musa* sp.) and useful plants such as the candlenut tree (*Aleurites moluccana*), supported the theory of Pacific settlement spreading from the West. In 1938, the Maori anthropologist Te Rangi Hīroa² (also known as Sir Peter Buck), had already described the Polynesians as the “Vikings of the Sunrise”, great navigators who had always travelled eastwards, leaving behind the sunset, the world of primal night to which souls returned upon death.

Thereafter, archaeological discoveries made over time between the 1950s and early 1980s (the *Lapita Homeland Project* in particular), provided evidence confirming the antiquity of the first settlement of Melanesia and West Polynesia, and also broadly confirming the direction of settlement. Austronesian outrigger canoes had set off south-eastwards from the Bismarck Sea, fighting winds and currents to reach the Reef Islands/Santa Cruz, then on to Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Wallis and Futuna.

Although navigating against wind and currents was certainly arduous work, it meant a speedy return to their point of departure if no new island was discovered³.

II. DIFFUSIONISM AND ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

Alongside these key scientific advances in understanding the history of human mobility, alternative views as to the prehistory of island groups have long survived in Oceania (especially in colonial societies). In Polynesia, for example, it is common, even today, to come across supporters of the view that the Pacific islands were settled by people from South America,

2 P. Buck (Te Rangi Hīroa), 1938, *Vikings of the Sunrise*, Philadelphia, J.-B. Lippincott & Co.

3 On this topic, see the (somewhat dated) overarching work of G. Irwin, published back in 1992, *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. For a work based on more recent data, see K.-R. Howe (ed.), 2007, *Vaka Moana, Voyages of the Ancestors: The Discovery and Settlement of the Pacific*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.

despite the near absence of Amerindian DNA in genome data from Pacific populations⁴, and despite the fundamental differences between the Austronesian languages and those spoken on the American continent.

Alternative views are also held in Melanesia; for example, “population replacement” theories asserting that a first settlement, of fair-skinned people skilled in “megalithism”, was behind some types of ancient vestiges, such as, in New Caledonia, tumuli found on the Isle of Pines, rock carvings, standing stones and fortifications. The theory is that they would then, and relatively recently, have been replaced by the present-day Melanesians, who were ignorant of such technical skills, deemed too difficult and too complex for them. Beyond the underlying racism evident in such theories, whether Polynesia or New Caledonia-based, they all rely on the model of diffusionism, an outdated school of European thought.

Diffusionism is characterized by the assertion that some major human discoveries or outstanding achievements could only have been invented once. Such inventions were subsequently dispersed worldwide by diffusion, either through exchanges of knowledge and skills, or through population movements, i.e. migration. For example, if we believed that the pyramids of Pre-Hispanic America had their origins in ancient Egypt, or that the great volcanic rock *tiki* of the Marquesas Islands were manifestations of Andean sculptural art, we would be taking a diffusionist view. It should be noted that contemporary “cult” pseudoarchaeology, with its conspiracy theory overtones, also frequently embraces such themes.

In terms of archaeological knowledge, even if diffusionism still numbered many followers during the interwar period, the discovery of absolute dating methods in the 1950s led to diffusionism as a methodological tool being rejected as antiquated, in the same way as advances in modern medicine led to the dismissal of phrenology or the theory of the four humours. The chronological disparities between the building of the Egyptian and Mayan pyramids could be clearly demonstrated, thereby ruling out any possibility of cultural diffusion between them. In the Pacific region, diffusionism unfortunately enjoyed – and still enjoys – much favour, due to local supporters who are highly active in the dissemination of groundless archaeological arguments.

In New Caledonia, for example, the founding of the Society for Historical Studies of New Caledonia (Société d’Études Historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie – SEHNC) in 1969 certainly paved the way for the publishing of many scholarly works on recent colonial history, its speciality, but also meant that outdated clichés like successive population replacements continued to be promoted.

Bernard Brou, primarily, but also other authors like Léo Paléo (pseudonym) used the *Bulletin* edited by the Society to promulgate population replacement theories put forward a century ago by Marius Archambault, a post office employee; theories in respect of which pastor and ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt, in a spirit of tolerance, had allowed some doubts to remain due to lack of evidence. French Institute of Oceania geologist Jacques Avias also expressed

⁴ A. G., Ioannidis, J. Blanco-Portillo, K. Sandoval *et al.*, 2020, “Native American Gene Flow into Polynesia predating Easter Island settlement”, *Nature*, no. 583, p. 572-577.

similar views in 1949, in a famous article published in the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*.⁵ Not content with publishing articles with, all in all, limited reach, in the *Bulletin de la société d'études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Bernard Brou was to produce two somewhat redundant works⁶, the second with a very high print run, still available today since it is regularly reprinted. Published in 1977, this work makes no mention of archaeological studies then underway in the Pacific, as witnessed by the many scientific articles on the Lapita phenomenon that had already appeared. For over thirty years, from the date this book was published until his death in 2009, and despite studies carried out by Daniel Frimigacci, Jean-Christophe Galipaud and Christophe Sand and his team, Bernard Brou never once suggested any reassessment or amendment to his book, where, page after page, he pushes his unsupported “population replacement” version of events. Moreover, Brou never withdrew the book from sale, even as evidence inexorably piled up to contradict his model. Worse, the first local history manual for schools, born of the determination, set out in the Matignon Accords, to include New Caledonian history in the school syllabus for history & geography, reflects views held by Brou⁷.

One may legitimately question the reason for this obsessive allegiance to an outdated and untenable model. In fact, beyond the intellectual ever-reluctant to abandon his long cherished ideas, in this particular case we should also take into account the political use of the population replacement theory in the extremely tense social climate of the period. The Kanak awakening of the 1970s, contemporaneous with the early years of the SEHNC, together with the surge in land claims, came up against the assertion of Caldoche legitimacy founded solely in the reality of colonialism. The decade of the “Events”, between 1981 and 1989, would see tensions reach a climax and New Caledonia plunged into a state of virtual civil war.

The “population replacement” theory could be employed to counter the Kanak claim of “first occupant”. It became a commonplace of Caldoche rhetoric, thanks to the SEH distribution network and its prestige amongst well-thought-of local social circles. Supported by albeit dated but nevertheless published scientific literature and coupled, in more or less good faith, with some significant figures in the field of science (Maurice Leenhardt and Jacques Avias), this race-based view of New Caledonian prehistory appeared to be both legitimate and pragmatic: it had the dual advantage of refuting the Kanak claim as first occupants of the land (thus negating their right to the land), and of justifying colonialism and the resulting appropriations of land (since this was merely one more replacement phase), which explains why many New Caledonians still hold onto this view.⁸

5 J. Avias, 1949, “Contribution à la préhistoire de l’Océanie : les tumuli des plateaux de fer en Nouvelle-Calédonie”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 5, p. 15-50.

6 See B. Brou, 1970, *Mémento d’histoire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Préhistoire et protohistoire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Antiquité et Moyen-Âge*, Noumea, self-distributed, and particularly B. Brou, 1977, *Préhistoire et société traditionnelle de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Noumea, Société d’études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie, publication no. 16.

7 Collective publication, 1992, *Histoire. Nouvelle-Calédonie – France*, Noumea, Société d’études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 47, particularly p. 5-8.

8 Christophe Sand has published several articles on the subject of pseudo-population replacements, explaining their continuing importance today. See for example C. Sand, J. Bole, A.-J. Ouetcho, 2003, “Les aléas de la construction ethnique multi-identitaire en Nouvelle-Calédonie”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 117, p. 147-169.

III. CURRENT DATA

As we have seen, Austronesian seafarers belonging to the Lapita cultural complex were the first to discover the archipelago of New Caledonia. This occurred around 1050 BCE, as part of a phase of very rapid expansion towards the east, along the Melanesian Arc (South East coast of Papua New Guinea, Reef/Santa Cruz Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia) and to Western Polynesia (Fiji, Wallis, Futuna, Samoa, Tonga). Lapita pottery, decorated with intricate stamped geometric patterns, formed part of the material culture of the Austronesian-speaking peoples: depending on island groups and chronology, the array of pottery includes large pots with rounded bases, plates, stemmed cups and covers, all decorated with stacked horizontal friezes often featuring anthropomorphic elements. In addition to pottery, the Austronesian peoples were skilled canoe builders; their tools included stone and shell adzes, indispensable in making dug-out canoes, but not axes. An interesting point is that, although their descendants gradually transformed the cutting edges of their adzes, they continued using adzes and never invented the handled axe so widespread in populations inhabiting continental environments.

This phase of Austronesian expansion into Remote Oceania was very rapid: starting from the Bismarck Archipelago in around 1500 BCE, it had reached Western Polynesia by around 850 BCE, i.e. 4,000 km further east. Although the front line of colonization then came to a halt, perhaps because the colonizing impetus ran out of steam, perhaps also because, as the seafarers progressed further eastwards, they encountered increasingly small islands with sparser biodiversity, complex interactions and trading and travel networks had developed in the newly discovered territories. As illustration, pottery formally identified as New Caledonian has been found in Vanuatu, and obsidian from Talasea in New Britain has been found in the stratigraphic layers of sites in New Caledonia, etc. This serves to justify designation as “Lapita cultural complex”, given that interactions and trading of exogenous materials are clearly identifiable, and that these probably only represent the visible part of a whole, within which perishable materials (mats, tapa bark), horticultural crops, and possibly even women were traded until, gradually, local roots grew and came to dominate such regional policies.

Recent work linking linguistics, physical anthropology, archaeology and genetics provides a clearer understanding of these early populations. It is now evident that Asian genes formed a major component of the DNA of these speakers of Austronesian languages, in clear correspondence with their sociolinguistic background.⁹ However, it is also certain that, very early on, their DNA carried Papuan genetic material, testifying to their sojourns (and the resulting genetic mixing) in the Bismarck Sea basin. While the Lapita cultural complex lasted, travel to and from their new countries and their native archipelago led to the gradual reinforcement of Papuan genetic material in populations living in the Western Pacific Islands

9 See, for example, M. Lipson, P. Skoglund, M. Spriggs, F. Valentin, S. Bedford, R. Shing, H. Buckley, I. Phillip, G. Ward, S. Mallick, N. Rohland, N. Broomandkhoshbacht, O. Cheronet, M. Ferry, T. Harper, M. Michel, J. Oppenheimer, K. Sirak, K. Stewardson, K. Auckland, A. Hill, K. Maitland, S. Oppenheimer, T. Parks, K. Robson, T. Williams, D. Kennett, A. Mentzer, R. Pinhasi, D. Reich, 2018. “Population Turnover in Remote Oceania Shortly after Initial Settlement”, *Current Biology*, no. 28, p. 1-9. See also C. Posth, K. Nägele, H. Colleran, F. Valentin, S. Bedford, K. Kami, R. Shing, H. Buckley, R. Kinaston, M. Walworth, G. Clark, C. Reepmeyer, J. Flexner, T. Maric, J. Moser, J. Gresky, L. Kiko, K. Robson, K. Auckland, S. Oppenheimer, A. Hill, A. Mentzer, J. Zech, F. Petchey, P. Roberts, C. Jeong, R. Gray, J. Krause, A. Powell, 2018, “Language Continuity despite Population Replacement in Remote Oceania”. *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, no. 2 (4), p. 731-740.

(including as far as Fiji). This highly genetically mixed group of peoples thus remained united by their Austronesian languages and a relatively homogeneous material culture, with Lapita pottery as its most outstanding characteristic.

There can be no question, in respect of New Caledonia, of a “population replacement” as advocated by Marius Archambault and Jacques Avias and later propagated by Bernard Brou. On the contrary, the advent of populations with a “reinforced” Papuan genetic makeup was a dynamic phenomenon within the Lapita cultural complex itself: such genetically renewed populations moved about, thanks to their knowledge of distant island groups, passed on by virtue of return trips undertaken within areas of linguistic intercomprehension. There were evidently many more of these “second or third generation” arrivals in island groups near the Bismarck Sea, excepting the far eastern ends of the Lapita settlements, namely Western Polynesia (Tonga, Samoa, Wallis, Futuna). This provides sufficient grounds to explain current variations in phenotype, i.e. physical appearance, seen in so-called “Melanesian” peoples with fairly dark skin and curly hair, and “Polynesian” peoples with slightly lighter skin and fairly straight hair. In reality, these two population groups share both Asian and Papuan genetic material – although today in different ratios – which we can trace back to their common origin. Indeed, Asian cultural traits (Cordyline and paper mulberry tree cultivation) and cultural traits originating in the New Guinea mainland (taro, yam and banana cultivation, the use of obsidian) can both be observed from one end of the Pacific to the other, once again confirming the view of dual influences in the origins of Pacific Islanders.¹⁰

IV. AN OCEANIA OF NETWORKS

Following the Lapita cultural complex, when crafting of the iconic finely stamped pottery diminished in around 700 BCE, the island group populations would appear to have turned inwards. Development of relations over long distances as part of extensive trading networks gave way to a drive to establish roots, ownership and cultural differentiation. In archipelagos like New Caledonia and Fiji, where good quality clay is plentiful, pottery continued, while archaeological collections in Western Polynesia reveal its disappearance. A divide appears to have gradually developed between a pottery-making Melanesia and a Polynesia where the craft had been forgotten but where the intricate decorations seen in Lapita pottery were transferred to knotted and woven mats, tattoos and tapa cloth patterns.

In the healthy, malaria-free environment of New Caledonia, population probably grew significantly, with conservative estimates advancing a figure of 55,000 inhabitants in the Main Island at the beginnings of the modern era.¹¹ This growth in population led to the appearance of new behaviours at local level, including the mining of some stones found in the geological unit of the central mountain range (mudstone, greywacke) or in more coastal areas (chert and jasper), with these being traded as far as the surrounding islands (Loyalty Islands, Isle of Pines). Raw materials were traded from person to person, either as blocks of stone or, in the case of remote regions, small finished tools. So while there was local diversification

¹⁰ A useful source for a recent overview on the Lapita phenomenon: S. Bedford, M. Spriggs (ed.), 2019, *Debating Lapita: Distribution, Chronology, Society and Subsistence*, Canberra, Australian National University Press.

¹¹ C. Sand, 1995, *Le temps d'avant. La préhistoire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, p. 112.

of pottery types, a sign that could be interpreted as a move towards differentiation and an inwards-looking culture, the trading of hard materials continued, a reflection of multiple connections between groups.¹²

Although the first millennium CE is the least well known in the history of New Caledonia, the same phenomenon can be seen in most populated island groups at the time of the Lapita cultural complex. This is the combined consequence of studies carried out by archaeologists, which have long focused on first settlement, studies led by ethnoarchaeologists or ethnologists, which centred on areas of traditional knowledge rarely extending over more than a few centuries, and finally the practical difficulty of identifying sites dating back over a thousand years, often more deeply buried than more recent sites. Accordingly, although we are generally well-informed as regards both original settlement of the islands and the centuries preceding contact with Europeans, there is very often little information about the period between these two events. In Eastern-Central Polynesia, this issue is of less importance, the islands having been settled shortly after the year one thousand. In the Western Pacific, the period extends over more than a millennium and we still have little information at our disposal.

However, in New Caledonia, the first millennium CE can, in many ways, be viewed as a melting pot foreshadowing the emergence of what is known as “the traditional Kanak cultural complex”.¹³ For example, serpentine (sometimes known as “semi-nephrite” or “New Caledonian jade”) begins to appear in archaeological material dating from the period. Serpentine was valued both for its toughness and beautiful dark green colour. People began to use serpentine to make adzes and, over the next thousand years, it was to become the stone almost exclusively defining the traditional Kanak cultural complex, used to fashion the necklaces worn by Kanak women, the rounded blades of so-called “ceremonial” axes and, of course, the cutting edges of triangular adzes. Likewise, the first irrigated terraces for taro cultivation appear to have been laid out at the end of the first millennium CE.

The second millennium CE was, first and foremost, the period marking the emergence of the Kanak cultural complex, i.e. all the emblematic material evidence of the Kanak world which would be observed by Europeans in the 18th century, including, for example: ceremonial axes, beads and pendants used in Kanak currency, greenstone beads, differently shaped adzes and sling-stones, Nera pottery in the South and Oundjo pottery in the North of the Main Island. Earthen mounds elevating Kanak round huts, the layout shaping Kanak villages, often arranged along a central pathway, and differently sized mounds indicating rank appeared during this period, concurrently with the establishment of large-scale, well-thought-out crop growing arrangements throughout the Main Island. Secondly, in chronological terms, the last one thousand years were also marked by significant Polynesian expansionism. Improved navigation techniques and the invention of large *tongiaki*-type double-hull canoes meant

¹² Fairly recent studies in the Isle of Pines, where workable stone would necessarily have been imported, have thrown light on such trading routes. See L. Lagarde, 2012, *Peuplement, dynamiques internes et relations externes dans un ensemble géographique cohérent de Mélanésie insulaire : l'exemple de l'Île des Pins en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, PhD dissertation under the direction of É. Conte, Université Paris 1 – Panthéon/Sorbonne.

¹³ We owe the term to Christophe Sand. See also C. Sand, J. Bolé, A.-J. Ouetcho, 2012, “L'ensemble culturel traditionnel kanak”, J. Bonvallot, J.-C. Gay, E. Habert (eds.), 2013. *Atlas de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Marseille, IRD Éditions, p. 103-106.

that groups inhabiting the islands of Samoa and Tonga could set out to explore the rest of the Polynesian triangle. This phase of unusually rapid dispersion which saw, in the space of a few centuries, settlement of the remote islands of Polynesia (Hawaii, Rapa Nui - Easter Island, and Aotearoa - New Zealand), was not limited to exploratory voyages to the east, “towards the rising sun” in the iconic words of Te Rangi Hīroa. Voyages to the west and northwest led Polynesians to set foot in Melanesia and Micronesia. The Polynesians necessarily made less impact on these islands, inhabited for over two millennia and with sizeable populations, than on the uninhabited islands discovered as they sailed eastwards. Yet they have left a significant legacy, as evidenced by the “Polynesian outliers”, small islands where embryonic Polynesian societies were established: the closest to our coasts being Aniwa and Futuna in Vanuatu, and, of course, Ouvéa, in the Loyalty Islands.¹⁴ Elsewhere, in the larger and more densely populated islands, Polynesian seafarers were more readily offered chieftdoms or key roles in fishing/warrior clans. Consequently, in Lifou, Maré, the Isle of Pines, and also in various locations on the east coast of the Main Island and in the far north of the archipelago, recurrent elements of oral tradition and place names testify to past links with Fiji, Samoa, and especially Tonga.

Chronologically-speaking, it is not easy to establish the dates of these early Polynesian returns to South Melanesia. Some authors have linked the story of Roy Mata, a legendary Vanuatu chief who lived in the late 16th century, with that of an historical figure of Polynesian origin.¹⁵ In New Caledonia, Polynesian chicken bones (*Gallus gallus*) identified as 15th century and found in a rock-shelter on the Isle of Pines, could date back to the introduction of the species to our region from Western Polynesia.¹⁶

Such external contacts with the Polynesian world renewed the gene pool, brought knowledge and skills (tattoos, weaving, fishing methods and navigation), led to the introduction of new crop varieties, and helped shape new socio-political structures. Known evidence includes *pwere toga* (“Tongan style”) weaving, tattooing, the introduction of yaws disease, often called “*tôga*” – a treponematosi related to syphilis and of Polynesian origin –, together with legends explaining how new yam varieties or net-fishing methods came to be known¹⁷. The well-known legend of “the octopus and the rat” recounts how octopus lures used in the Loyalty Islands came to be made. Octopus lures, found from New Caledonia as far as the Marquesas Islands, appear to derive from pan-Polynesian knowledge spread to our region as a result of such voyages.

In the late 18th century, when the native population first came into contact with crews from European ships, New Caledonia’s indigenous society, throughout the island group,

14 For an overview on the Polynesian outliers, see R. Feinberg, R. Scaglione, 2012, *Polynesian Outliers: The State of the Art*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Ethnology Monographs no. 21, notably the chapters by P.V. Kirch and M. Carson reviewing archaeological data.

15 J. Garanger, 1972, *Archéologie des Nouvelles-Hébrides. Contribution à la connaissance des îles du Centre*, Paris, Société des Océanistes, p. 128-129, and also J. Bonnemaïson, 1996, “La coutume ou les formes du pouvoir politique traditionnel au Vanuatu”, in C. Kaufmann, R. Boulay, K. Huffman, 1996, *Vanuatu – Océanie : art des îles de centre et de corail*, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, p. 224-225. The issue remains, however, the subject of much debate.

16 See also L. Lagarde, 2017, “L’île des Pins et ses relations avec la Polynésie. Données archéologiques et particularités stylistiques”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 144-145, p. 253-268.

17 See the whole of the chapter on the Isle of Pines in the book by J. Guiart, 1963, *Structure de la chefferie en Mélanésie du Sud*, Paris, Institut d’ethnologie, p. 205-246.

possessed a shared range of material goods (ceremonial axes, jade necklaces, wooden clubs, plant fibre skirts...). That said, native society was also shaped by recurrent landings by incoming canoes: beneath a superficial unity, many clearly differentiated languages were in use, there was a local diversity of sculptural styles, social structures and myths of origin, and thus distinctive *Kanak lands*. This unity in diversity, the result of continual interaction and evolving alliances, formed beyond doubt the basis for the incredible complexity of pre-European New Caledonian society. In such a mountainous country, the central mountain range did not play the role of a natural border but of a channel of communication between the two coasts. Multilingualism, networks of identification shared from one end of the archipelago to the other, and extended marriage systems were the factors binding together a relative cultural unity.¹⁸

V. CONTACT WITH EUROPEANS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Like elsewhere in the Pacific, the first landings by Europeans and repeated stops by ships from the 1790s onwards, constituted a tipping point. New diseases introduced, mostly unintentionally, by sailors, led to cataclysmic depopulation in the Pacific, and New Caledonia was not spared. It is almost impossible to estimate local population decline due to the lack of numerous variables (foremost, a reasonable approximation of the Kanak population when Cook first landed¹⁹). However, comparison with other Pacific island groups where population numbers are better known would suggest, at the lowest estimate, a decline of 70 to 80% in the population of New Caledonia in the decades following initial contacts with Europeans.

Contact with Europeans also implied the transfer of skills/knowledge (weapons handling, shipbuilding, architecture) and materials (glass, metal). Imported materials instantly acquired a high value, precious status and some, such as fabric and tobacco, would become indispensable components of Kanak customary gesture rituals. At the time, as the first traffickers/beachcombers or missionaries were settling permanently in the islands (the former also laying down roots and founding nowadays respected and fully integrated clans), hybrid objects made an appearance (clubs with metal blades, belts and collars incorporating glass beads, knapped glass awls).

Oceania then witnessed a rush to evangelize native peoples and reap resources, mainly sandalwood, cetaceans and sea cucumbers. All three were avidly garnered in New Caledonia to be trafficked in operations controlled by Europeans, who chartered ships and supervised trading.²⁰ However, Oceanians volunteered on the ships as Europeans were seen to defect.

18 L. Lagarde, E. Dotte-Sarout, S. Domergue, J.-M. Wadrawane, 2020, "L'archéologie", in L. Lagarde L. (ed.), 2020. *Le patrimoine de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, HC Éditions for the Fondation Clément, p. 62-67.

19 We share the doubts expressed by C. Sand regarding the estimates, as detailed in C. Sand, 1995, made by Johann Forster, a naturalist on board Cook's second voyage, *Le temps d'avant*, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

20 See for example M.-J. Dubois, 1969, "L'arrivée des Blancs à Maré : tragiques contacts, 1793-1851", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 25, p. 307-316, and of course D. Shineberg, 1967, *They Came for Sandalwood: a Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the Southwest Pacific, 1830-1865*, Melbourne University Press. See also K.R. Howe, 1977, *The Loyalty Islands: A History of Culture Contacts, 1840-1900*, University Press of Hawaii. For an approach to the colonial period, see J. Guiart, 1983, *La terre est le sang des morts. La confrontation entre Blancs et Noirs dans le Pacifique Sud français*, Paris, Anthropos.

They sailed the seas, and (re)discovered their regional environment. Kanak leaders welcomed teachers, negotiated with traffickers, and turned them away or attacked their boats: the terms of trade were sometimes unacceptable and the crew of the *Star* was massacred at the Isle of Pines in November 1842²¹. In addition to the British captain, the ship carried seven other European sailors, two men from Huahine, three from the Cook Islands, a Marquesan and a Hawaiian, plus three Polynesian teachers, Taniela and Lasalo from Samoa and Rangi from Rarotonga. Far from being the helpless victims of a process where they could only look on as their fellows foundered, the Oceanians (*a fortiori* Kanak) played a truly active role in this early form of globalization, as sailors, pastors, interpreters, guides and figures wielding power.

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21 See R. Crocombe and M. Crocombe, 1968, *The Works of Ta'unga*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, and also G. Pisier, 1969, "Premiers contacts entre l'île des Pins et l'Occident, 1840-1843", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 25, p. 71-93. See also L. Lagarde, forthcoming article: "Violences en Mélanésie et intensification des contacts avec les Européens : l'exemple de l'île des Pins en Nouvelle-Calédonie", in É. Conte, S. Tcherkézoff, G. Molle (ed.), *À la croisée des vagues. Océaniens et Occidentaux. Anthropologie historique de la violence, 16^e-19^e siècles*, Papeete, Maison des sciences de l'Homme du Pacifique.

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