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# The historical origins of a multicultural society in Oceania

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► **To cite this version:**

Louis Lagarde. The historical origins of a multicultural society in Oceania. Caroline Gravelat. Understanding New Caledonia, 2021. hal-03593378

**HAL Id: hal-03593378**

**<https://unc.hal.science/hal-03593378>**

Submitted on 6 Jul 2022

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Visitors to New Caledonia today cannot but be struck by the physical diversity of its population. As we have seen, contacts over the last millennium with peoples from the outside world (especially from Western Polynesia) enriched the gene pool of the Kanak people and diversified local phenotypes.

Again, more recently, French colonial rule led to numbers of people coming to New Caledonia from France, particularly under the penitentiary regime, and this population is generally seen today as the foundation of the so-called “Caldoche” community, a term which was originally pejorative but is – perhaps – in the process of being embraced by the community in question. Accordingly, only two ethnic groups are usually taken into consideration in New Caledonia, the colonized indigenous people on the one hand, and the Europeans and associated communities on the other, a vast group which includes long-established New Caledonians and Europeans who arrived later on, together with various Asian and Oceanic ethnic communities who arrived as indentured labourers and, of course, the many people of mixed-heritage who are the descendants of several human trajectories.

Of course, this concept is a simplification and we will attempt to untangle some of the chronological, geographical and cultural complexities in this chapter. Over and above what these communities have brought to the building of contemporary New Caledonia, what we are really concerned with here is a story of mobilities and diasporas.

### I. COMPLEX EUROPEAN INPUTS

Europeans have settled in New Caledonia throughout the recent past of the archipelago, and the first to settle there were not French. A case in point is James Paddon, often considered to be “the first New Caledonian settler”, who was British. Born in Portsmouth in 1812, he joined the British Navy and ended up trading sandalwood in the islands of South Melanesia in the 1840s. Following attempts to set up a base in the south of the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), then on the Isle of Pines, he finally established a trading post on Nou Island (now Nouville – a Noumea suburb), a permanent station comprising houses for him and his staff, a boatyard for repairs to ships and a farm to produce food to carry on board, with employees naturally – of all origins – on site. Having purchased this island from Grand Chief Quindo, Paddon used it as a port for trading operations ranging between the Melanesian archipelagos, Australia and China. Paddon later ceded Nou Island to the French government in exchange for vast estates in Païta and brought several families of close friends or relatives across to New Caledonia. These English-speaking British subjects are known as the “Paddon settlers”

within the New Caledonian microcosm.<sup>1</sup> The term is useful in highlighting their British origin and the length of time they have been in the archipelago, as well as setting them apart as families who are not descended from convicts, unlike many other New Caledonians. The Paddon settlers had a fair amount of influence right from the early days of New Caledonia's colonial history and held many senior positions, also preserving close relations with the neighbouring British Dominion of Australia. Various terms and expressions borrowed directly from English remain as a legacy of this era when many members of the best colonial social circles were English-speaking; such terms still add colour to local French. For example, a *ruisseau* (stream) is known as a *creek*, a *ponton* as a *wharf*, the word *paddock* is used for an animal pen and a bi-coloured horse is called *piebald* rather than by the French word *pie*. The word *store* is often seen on shop signs, and the English expression *tata!* is a common way of saying *au revoir*.<sup>2</sup>

These are not the only examples of the influence of English words in local languages. In the same way as English expressions worked their way into local French, they became part of the languages spoken in the Loyalty Islands due to the influence of British Protestant missionaries: *farawa*, derived from *flour*, refers to bread (*pain*), *waina* to wine (*vin*), *bi* to bee (*abeille*). Even *hanying* which, in the Drehu language (Lifou) is used for someone you love, is derived from the colloquial English term *honey*. In the south of the Main Island, where the influence of English-speaking missionaries was very short-lived, people in tribes play old card games where the suits are known as *hat*, *calap*, *daiman* and *supedj*, from “hearts”, “clubs”, “diamonds” and “spades”. Many more examples could be given.

In addition to the influence of English speakers, the free settlement process attracted French people from all regions of France. Free settlers were already coming to New Caledonia during the era of convict shipments (*transportés*, *deportés* and *relégués*) from 1864 to 1897, but there was a significant rise in free settlement at the turn of the 20th century as a result of Governor Paul Feillet's settlement promotion policy.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, new settlers from every region of France landed in Noumea but, although there is much less mention of them, there were also numbers of French people who had previously settled in other territories.

A close study of personal stories often reveals “multi-colonial” family histories: for instance, people born in Algeria, Bourbon Island (now Reunion Island) and Saint-Louis in Senegal ended up in New Caledonia. In the 1950s, Father Patrick O'Reilly had drawn up biographical registers for families (mainly descended from settlers) in the French-speaking archipelagos of the South Pacific. Respectively entitled *Calédoniens*, *Hébridais* and *Tahitiens*, O'Reilly's volumes reveal an impressive similarity in surnames occurring and reoccurring in each

1 Among the “Paddon settlers” were also German-speaking families, brought to New Caledonia by Paddon's German collaborator Ferdinand Knoblauch. Although most of them also spoke English, they seem to have left no impact on the local French idiom.

2 The first person to show an interest in the subject seems, as was often the case, to have been the Catholic priest Patrick O'Reilly. See P. O'Reilly, 1953, “Le français parlé en Nouvelle-Calédonie : apports étrangers et vocables nouveaux”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 9, p. 203-228.

3 Figures indicate that in the 1990s, one third of the so-called Caldoche population was descended from free settlers, compared with two thirds from freed convicts. All the same, since marriages between descendants of free settlers and convict settlers became accepted – although this took time – and society moved on, such figures have less and less relevance.

book.<sup>4</sup> A meticulous reading of the volumes really brings to light the links which have always existed between the archipelagos of the “French-speaking Pacific”. For example, members of New Caledonian families could settle in French Polynesia, and a New Caledonian younger son could become a planter in the New Hebrides and establish a family there, while *demis* from Tahiti<sup>5</sup>, who came to Noumea to study for the baccalauréat (high school diploma) in the 20th century, never left. This history of colonial mobilities in the French-speaking Pacific, of which an account remains to be written, could prove extremely helpful in reaching an understanding of the profound ties which unite French Polynesia, Vanuatu and contemporary New Caledonia. Of course, there is no equivalent of his work – because not all archipelagos boasted a Father O’Reilly – as regards the islands of the Pacific under the British influence and, evidently, no such work relating to other French colonies. Nevertheless, there is a strong likelihood that many surnames seen today as “New Caledonian” could occur well beyond the shores of our archipelago, in Reunion Island (which is commonplace and we will see why), and also in the Caribbean, in Africa or in former French Indochina.

## II. A COSMOPOLITAN PENITENTIARY

The works of historian Louis-José Barbançon have highlighted the cosmopolitan nature of New Caledonia’s penitentiary. In his latest book on the subject<sup>6</sup>, Barbançon focusses on this aspect (even though the vast majority of convicts came from France) to demonstrate that New Caledonia’s convict history does indeed represent a collective heritage for the communities which make up contemporary New Caledonian society. He put at over 2,000 the number of convicts transported from the Maghreb, almost all from Algeria - Muslims and speakers of Arabic.<sup>7</sup> As a result of being uniformly identified by the Penitentiary authorities as “Arabs”, this group has become, over 120 years later, a deeply-rooted community which now prides itself on the term. Very well established in the Bourail region, especially in Nessadiou, the Arabs eventually formed communities according to shared language and spiritual beliefs and are a perfect illustration of the many paradoxes of colonization. Originally convicted for their hostility to the French presence in their own country, some having actively engaged in anti-French combat, the Algerian transportees and deportees later became settlers in their newly adopted country, awarded lands seized from the Kanak clans who were the legitimate owners of the land. Once victims, they became active players in the settlement process even though, as freed convicts, they faced miserably poor living conditions.

4 P. O’Reilly, 1953, *Calédoniens. Répertoire bibliographique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, Société des Océanistes. P. O’Reilly, 1957, *Hébridais. Répertoire bibliographique des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, Paris, Société des Océanistes. P. O’Reilly, Raoul Teissier, 1962, *Tahitiens. Répertoire bibliographique de la Polynésie française*, Paris, Société des Océanistes.

5 The term “demi(e)”, widely-used in French Polynesia, refers to a person whose genetic heritage is partly perceived as Polynesian and partly as European, and is a term dating back to the colonial era. Regarding the way Tahitians see themselves, see the study by Bruno Saura, 2011, *Des Tahitiens, des Français. Leurs représentations réciproques aujourd’hui*, Papeete, Au vent des Îles.

6 L.-J. Barbançon, 2020, *Le mémorial du bagne calédonien. Entre les chaînes et la terre*, Papeete, Au vent des îles. See also L.-J. Barbançon, 2003, *L’archipel des forçats. Histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1863-1931*, Lille, Presses universitaires du Septentrion.

7 See also L.-J. Barbançon, Christophe Sand, 2013, *Calédoun : histoire des Arabes et Berbères de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Noumea, Institut d’archéologie de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et du Pacifique – Associations des Arabes et amis des Arabes de Nouvelle-Calédonie.



In addition to Arabic-speaking convicts, New Caledonia's penitentiary contained prisoners from many other places. Unfortunates from the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, Reunion Island, India (French East India Company trading posts), Tonkin, Indonesia, Oceania and, of course, Kanak were also victims of the convict labour system. Thus, France, as a colonial power extending its rule over distant territories, packed its felons and lawbreakers off to New Caledonia. An analysis of the population housed in New Caledonia's convict facilities (and consequently the population of freed convicts) reveals the extent of France's colonial empire. To this motley convict community should be added nationals from other European countries, arrested and sentenced in France then shipped to Noumea. The main foreign-born transportees were citizens from France's border countries, namely Belgium and Germany – including Alsace and Lorraine after 1870, Italy and Spain: all came to seek work in France, at that time a hub of vast industrial growth. Crushed and robbed of self-worth by the terrible might of the penal regime, having spent years and sometime decades identified by just a number, any attempt to reassert their national or regional identity in local terms was a huge struggle. It was not until attitudes to convict origins changed in the late 20th century, and it became easier to access the personal files of past convicts held in the French Overseas Archives, that some of their descendants were able to carry out researches and, for such families, the non-French origins of their ancestor finally came to represent not just a point of interest but a reason for genuine pride.

### III. THE SUGAR VENTURE, A KEY LINK WITH REUNION ISLAND

During the penal regime years, in the 1860s, farming projects were also launched in New Caledonia. Sugar cane farming appeared a promising idea given that sugar cane was one of the crops traditionally grown in Oceania (in this case, traditionally farmed by Kanak), and was encouraged by Governor Guillain in 1865. The idea at that time was that convict labour resources would be enough to ensure the rapid growth of the sugar industry; however, sugar cane farming also required specialists, from plantation owners to overseers skilled in cane planting, harvesting and processing. As a result, immigration from Reunion Island, where the sugar sector had been badly hit since 1862<sup>8</sup> began to take shape. The idea at the time was to take advantage of rapid goldrush-driven growth in Australia to sell off New Caledonia's sugar production. Although the plants set up in Koé, Ouménie and Bacouya were all to be doomed to end in spectacular failure, they did pave the way for the establishment of new communities in New Caledonia. Wealthy settler families who acquired vast estates, Indian-born workers, known locally as "Malabars", and foremen skilled in the use of machinery, all brought to New Caledonia some of the knowledge and traditions drawn from their lives in the Indian Ocean. They introduced new plant species, planting guava and lychee trees (known locally as *letchis*, their name in Reunion Island), they added spices to local cuisine, and the Creole pharmacopoeia (ayapana, soursop and guava leaves) became commonly used and quickly merged with traditional Kanak medicinal knowledge. Their influence can also be seen in local colonial architecture: some wealthy settlers from Reunion Island, such as Thomy Celières, built rather imposing mansions in the capital, with square pavilions adorning the facade, a style which was to have an enduring influence on New Caledonia's Creole houses.

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8 For a detailed study, see J. Delathière, 2009, *L'aventure sucrière en Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1865-1900*, Noumea, Société d'études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 67.

#### IV. INDENTURED LABOURERS FROM ASIA

There was very little mechanization of mining in the late 19th century so mines were almost exclusively dependent on manual workers and required an abundant supply of cheap labour. Labourers from the New Hebrides and convict labour made up the first groups of mine workers used by the recently formed Le Nickel (SLN) mining company in the 1870s and 1880s. Their living and working conditions were appalling and, in the wake of reports on inspections carried out by the penal authorities (administration pénitentiaire – AP), these “contracts of human flesh” between the mining companies and the AP were ended in 1894.<sup>9</sup> However, productivity remained a priority, so the drop in numbers of convicts working as forced labour in the mines had to be offset by an influx of other workers. Their place was taken by indentured labourers from a variety of countries or colonies in Asia, the main communities involved coming from Tonkin in North Vietnam, Japan and Indonesia.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Tonkinese labourers, also known as *Chân Dàng* (“feet under contract” in Vietnamese) might be freely contracted, some of them were also convicts from Poulo Condor prison, a colonial penitentiary of sinister reputation located on an island off Saigon. Anti-colonial militants were imprisoned in Poulo Condor to serve sentences of varying length in abominable conditions. Some of them therefore left to work in New Caledonia’s mines; what we were actually seeing was convicts taking the place of convicts: the system of quasi cost-free labour supply, a kind of new slavery based on the initial “contracts of human flesh”, only ended because it carried on, exploiting different communities perhaps, but communities equally deprived of all human rights<sup>11</sup>. When they arrived in 1891 as colonial subjects, the Tonkinese were deemed to rank as “indigenous” – since the Indigenous Regime had been established in New Caledonia in 1887<sup>12</sup> – and not as citizens, something which would play a much greater role than any language barrier in setting them apart as a community.<sup>13</sup> Even so, once they had worked out their mining contracts, those who decided to settle permanently would gravitate to urban centres and gradually work their way up in trading circles, a phenomenon also seen in the neighbouring New Hebrides<sup>14</sup> and, in the case of the Chinese community, in French

9 Notwithstanding, the old contracts remained in force until 1899. Furthermore, while convicts were no longer obliged to work in the mines as forced labour, freed convicts could choose to become indentured mine workers. Therefore, relations between the mining industry and New Caledonia’s cosmopolitan penitentiary did not really come to an end. See L-J. Barbançon, 2020, *Le mémorial du bagne Caledonian. Entre les chaînes et la terre*, Papeete, Au vent des Îles, vol. 2, p. 771-801.

10 One convoy of indentured labourers also came to New Caledonia from China in the late 19th century, but unlike the other communities mentioned in this chapter, no permanent settlement resulted.

11 The *Chéribon* brought across the first convoy of Tonkinese in 1891, carrying over 700 contracted labourers on board, including 479 convicts from Poulo Condor. See L-J. Barbançon, V. Devambe, 1992, “Les Damnés du Chéribon”, in *Paroles de la Grande Terre et des Îles*, Noumea, no. 1 & 2.

12 Regarding the indigenous regime, see the recent and well researched study by I. Merle, A. Muckle, 2019, *L’indigénat. Genèses dans l’empire français. Pratiques en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, CNRS éditions.

13 The two essential works of reference on the Tonkinese labourers are the book by J. Van Mai, 1980, *Chân Dàng. Les Tonkinois de Nouvelle-Calédonie au temps colonial*, Noumea, Société d’études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 24, and J. Van Mai, 2000, *1891-1991 : centenaire de la présence vietnamienne en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Points d’histoire, Noumea, Centre de recherche et de développement pédagogique.

14 The status of Tonkinese contracted labourers working on large plantations in the New Hebrides has been little researched to date, but the American novelist James Michener, a former war correspondent in the Pacific during the Second World War, described it with compelling force. The tensions between workers and plantation owners reached their peak at the time of the Indochina War. J. Michener, 1951, *Return to Paradise*, New York, Random House, in particular his short story “The Good Life”.

Polynesia.<sup>15</sup> Although a few Vietnamese words sometimes make an appearance in local French (sometimes without the speaker even being aware of the origin of a word, such as the term *toi* to mean “enough”), the Vietnamese community’s cultural contributions to New Caledonian life are now seen first and foremost in terms of “cuisine”: yet major 20th century New Caledonian photographers<sup>16</sup> and furniture designers<sup>17</sup> have also left a significant tangible legacy. Finally, because there was significant mobility in the Vietnamese community throughout the 20th century, with some people returning to North Vietnam after the Indochina War<sup>18</sup>, and considerable immigration from the Saigon region during the 1970s, it is too easy to forget what they achieved by their labour, without which the growth of the mining companies – whether they endured or not – would have been impossible.

Japanese labourers also came under contract to work in local mines at the end of the 19th century, but were accorded a different status. They were nationals of a sovereign country which was at the time, in European eyes, the most modern – since the most Westernized – country in Asia. These contracted Japanese workers (about 5,500 between 1892 and 1919) came to New Caledonia alone, without wives or family; they succeeded in fitting into the local community and, unusually, found acceptance at all levels of society. Nevertheless, these citizens of the Empire of Japan and their mixed-race descendants were to be the victims of one of the 20th century’s worst acts of silent injustice: during World War II, Allied military command decided that these citizens of Emperor Hirohito’s Japan should be interned on suspicion of passing intelligence to the enemy. It should be noted that, with a Japanese community established in Noumea since the late 19th century, and in view of New Caledonia’s immense mineral reserves, particularly iron, Japan maintained a diplomatic mission in Noumea. In point of fact, New Caledonia supplied Japan with iron ore throughout the 1930s, contributing directly to the development of Japanese industry and military strength. After the attack on Pearl Harbour which brought the United States into World War II, New Caledonia acquired immense strategic importance for both Japan and the US: Japan saw it as a means of isolating Australia and a well-placed armaments production base, the US saw it as the perfect advance base to halt Japanese expansion and begin the slow process of winning back the Southwest Pacific. The Japanese workers, many of whom had arrived in New Caledonia decades earlier, who were often elderly and had made their homes in their new country, were rounded up and imprisoned in old cells once used for convicts. They were then sent on to Australian POW camps and finally repatriated to Japan after the war, their families left with no knowledge of what had become of them. These families, torn asunder by war and decisions having no base in reason or reality, would never succeed in finding each other again. The mixed-race children, who had Japanese names but generally no knowledge of their language and culture, were the greatest victims of events during this period.<sup>19</sup> This is

15 See G. Coppenrath, 1967, *Les Chinois à Tahiti, de l'aversion à l'assimilation, 1865-1966*, Paris, Société des Océanistes.

16 Like Le Ngoc Lien, known as Ca Lê, and his son Noël. The latter, a photographer and postcard editor, was the author of the first photographic book on New Caledonia, mostly in black and white. N. Calé, M. Bitter, 1965, *Nouvelle-Calédonie. Île de lumière*, Noumea, Nouméa éditions.

17 Like cabinetmaker Phan Thuang Phong. It must be acknowledged, however, that both Ca Lê and Phan Thuang Phong were political deportees from Indochina, not indentured labourers.

18 This brief overview is not the place to discuss political activism, but New Caledonia’s Tonkinese and Javanese communities both followed with keen interest the wars of liberation in their respective countries. Relations with the local government at the time were extremely strained, and there were frequent protests or riots in the late 1940s.

19 See also M. Tsuda, 2006, *Feu nos pères Les émigrants japonais en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Noumea, ADCK-Tjibaou Cultural

why, although New Caledonia is now home to an extensive community of Japanese descent, they are not considered as having been in a position to contribute a significant legacy to the building of New Caledonia. Yet, when viewed in the light of New Caledonia's current quest to develop a national identity, it is precisely the diverse ethnic and cultural mix characteristic of this community which makes them so fundamentally relevant today.

Workers from the Dutch Indies (now Indonesia) were called *Javanais* in local French. The term was not meant maliciously since most of the *Orang kontrak* (men under contract) came from the island of Java, the second largest in the archipelago<sup>20</sup>. Their status was even more complex than that of the Japanese workers: they were colonial subjects, like the Tonkinese, but under the rule of another colonial power, the Netherlands. This explains why there had been a Dutch diplomatic mission in New Caledonia since the end of the 19th century, its main task being to oversee issues involving Javanese contract workers in collaboration with the local authorities. Convoys of Indonesians arrived in New Caledonia from 1896 to 1949, providing a labour force of around twenty thousand male and female workers (many came with their families) employed in a number of areas: they were initially scheduled to work in the mines but convict shipments came to an end and Governor Feillet's free settlement drive began almost contemporaneously with their arrival in New Caledonia in 1896.<sup>21</sup> The Governor also promoted the coffee industry, which required tenant farmers and coffee pickers. A great many Indonesians settled in locations all over the Main Island, the men working in coffee farming and the women making up a significant portion of the colony's ancillary staff. In fact, the "authorized occupations" for contracted workers were specified – and thus restricted – in workers' logbooks. Almost all women were classified as "domestic servant".

## V. THE OCEANIANS

It would be wrong to think of the Pacific Islands as existing in a state of complete self sufficiency, cut off by the unfathomable ocean, prior to contact with the first Europeans. In fact, oral traditions and the findings of archaeological excavations all go to show that the wide ocean spaces served, particularly in the last millennium, as a series of communication channels for people and goods, creating local, regional, or even more widely spread networks. As we have seen, large double-hulled outrigger canoes from Western Polynesia and probably also from Vanuatu landed in New Caledonia as early as the 15th century. Accordingly, we could well be justified in seeing the arrival of Oceanian workers in the 19th and 20th centuries as simply the historical extension of much older relationships, and in seeing New Caledonia as almost being their home.<sup>22</sup>

The Protestant native teachers of the London Missionary Society (LMS) were among the first non-Kanak Oceanians to set foot in New Caledonia in the 19th century; together, of course,

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Centre. On the Japanese in NC, see also Ph. Palombo, 2012, *La présence japonaise en Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1890-1960*, Sarrebruck, Éditions universitaires européennes.

20 See C. Adi, 2014, *Orang Kontrak : les engagés originaires de Java venus sous contrat en Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1896-1955*. Koné, Éditions de la province Nord de la Nouvelle-Calédonie.

21 C. Terrier, 2014, *Nouméa, Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1900. Colons, Canaques, Coolies*, Noumea, Ville de Nouméa.

22 This theme was explored by the Tāvaka Ianu'imoana exhibition. See M-S. Drouet-Manufekai (ed.), 2009, *Tāvaka Ianu'imoana, mémoires de voyages*. Noumea, ADCK – Tāvaka.



with some Oceanian sailors under contract on European ships and engaged in free trading (sandalwood, whaling). The fact that Oceanians were working as crew members under the command of (often English-speaking) European captains has sometimes been confused with the practice of blackbirding (press ganging). However, they were actually free volunteers, shaping rather than victims of their destiny.<sup>23</sup>

Be that as it may, the rapid development of plantations in Queensland (Australia) and the need for workers in some Pacific regions (New Caledonia's Main Island, Viti Levu island in Fiji) from the 1860s onwards meant an ever-increasing supply of labourers was required<sup>24</sup>. "Recruitment" vessels, a euphemism for the coercive kidnapping of people to work as slaves or poorly paid labourers, crisscrossed Melanesia and dropped off their human cargoes in Australia, Noumea and Suva: this really was blackbirding. Although the Australian sugar cane industry played a key role in destroying the lives of these Pacific islanders, known as *Kanakas* at the time, it should not be forgotten that the victims of blackbirding also ended up on New Caledonia's Main Island, working as servants or on farm estates owned by free settlers. For example, in his romanticized account of his escape (from the Noumea penitentiary), former Communard Henri Rochefort records:

[Captain] Hubert [...] had come marauding on her shore. Ratouma's three children, two boys, one aged seventeen, the other eighteen, and a thirteen-year-old girl had been included in those captured, and when she had run to beg the captain to release them, he had seized her, gagged her to silence her, and then put her with the other prisoners in the tween deck of his schooner. On landing in Noumea, she had been separated from her children, all three sold to a settler from the North of the colony, while she had finished up with Rouvion, for a sum she vaguely indicated by making a gesture with her right thumb in the palm of her left hand as if counting money.

Despite the introduction of legislation<sup>25</sup> designed to authorize travelling for workers only if they were in possession of approved recruitment contracts, the illegal trafficking of Oceanians in the Pacific Ocean flourished in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1929, New Caledonian writer Jean Mariotti described it thus in his first novel, *Tout est peut-être inutile*:

*This was done with the connivance of the Government because these Blacks were supposed to have entered into contracts freely. Moreover, their sellers had the signed contracts to hand as evidence. It was very easy to get such signatures on board ship. In return for a little rice, a little*

23 K. Howe, 1978, *Les îles Loyauté : histoire des contacts culturels de 1840 à 1900*, Noumea, Société d'études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 19. See also D. Shineberg, 1973, *Ils étaient venus chercher du santal*, Noumea, Société d'études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 3.

24 P. de Deckker (ed.), 1994, *Le peuplement du Pacifique et de la Nouvelle-Calédonie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan and Université française du Pacifique.

25 One of the first Orders designed to regulate the employment of contracted workers was promulgated on 26 March 1874. It was used as a basis for subsequent legislation regulating various communities of workers, including contracted Kanak, a subject not covered in this article. The Order was adopted with the aim of ending the blackbirding of New Hebrideans, and provided for controls on recruitment conditions, a medical check-up, fixed-term contracts, basic living conditions (rations, accommodation, clothing), set working hours and terms and conditions for repatriation. Notwithstanding, contracted workers did not possess the status of free workers and their movements were monitored and restricted. Y. Bencivengo, 2012, "L'immigration japonaise en Nouvelle-Calédonie : une illustration de l'affirmation du Japon dans le Pacifique", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 135, p. 215-228.

*water. After that, the Canaques could make all the denials they liked. The proof of their free consent was right there.*

In 1901, the enactment of a bill by the fledgling Australian Federation<sup>26</sup>, part of the larger *White Australia Policy*, designed to encourage the white settlement of Australia, suddenly cut off the main market for blackbirders operating in Melanesia, and the establishment of the Franco-British Condominium in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) in 1906 paved the way for the introduction of standards and thus regulations controlling the contracting of workers in the New Hebrides archipelago. New Hebridean workers would continue to flock to Noumea and be dispatched to farm estates, including coffee farms, in the bush, but the position and status of such workers would henceforth be fairly similar to Javanese and Tonkinese workers<sup>27</sup>. While a process of long-awaited repatriations to South Pacific archipelagos began in 1906 in Australia, the fact that such repatriations were compulsory sometimes resulted in more deportations, all as unbearably painful for the victims as the kidnappings they had suffered several years or decades earlier. Some Oceanian workers had married or bought land and settled in Australia, and they were once again uprooted from their homes and new country. While New Caledonia is closer to the New Hebrides than Australia is, the great outpouring of joy by New Hebrideans who had worked out their contracts, was never forgotten. Francis Carco describes such scenes in his childhood memories:<sup>28</sup>

*Just imagine, the blacks leaving for good when they had worked out their time with a planter or a government official. There was a sudden flurry and bustle in the streets, guttural yells, a parade of free men, barefoot and carrying suitcases with nothing in them. The colonial soldiers watched them pass with stern and alert eyes... But the other blacks, who were not leaving on this boat, waited by the kitchens until their comrades had boarded the boat before daring to come out.*

The other Oceanian communities to settle in New Caledonia's Main Island were nationals from the *Établissements français de l'Océanie* (now French Polynesia) known simply as Tahitians, and natives from the islands of Wallis and Futuna, known most often as "Wallisians". Mass immigration of these communities to New Caledonia only occurred during the post-war period, thanks to the country's unprecedented development. The so-called "nickel boom" years witnessed a surge in population numbers and strong growth in many sectors (construction, tourism, the press and culture). However, the numbers of Tahitians flocking to New Caledonia should be set against the numbers of New Caledonians heading for Polynesia: there was a marked increase in exchanges between France's two Pacific territories, Polynesia at the time also experiencing a phase of intense development. Major New Caledonian construction projects, such as the Yaté hydroelectric dam, the sports-related infrastructure for the 1966 Pacific Games, and extensive social housing projects (low-rent residential buildings) had counterparts in the construction of the Pacific (Nuclear) Test Centre, the development and expansion of Faa'a International Airport and, as a result, the

<sup>26</sup> This was the *Pacific Islands Labourer Act*.

<sup>27</sup> See D. Shineberg, 2003, *La main-d'œuvre néo-hébridaise en Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1865-1930*, Noumea, Société d'études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 61.

<sup>28</sup> F. Carco, 1920, *Maman Petitdoigt*, Paris, R. Davis et Cie.



construction of multiple major hotel complexes. There were close and constant relations between Papeete and Noumea and family relationships were woven... and interwoven.<sup>29</sup>

The islands of Wallis and Futuna also represented a significant manpower resource. Mainly employed, like the Tahitians, on the major construction projects of the 30-year postwar boom period, islanders from Wallis and Futuna were the hands-on labour force behind business leaders and architects acclaimed today. Now long-established members of local society, the Wallisians and Futunans preserve close ties with their *fenua*, their native land. In New Caledonia, they form a community with very vibrant traditions in which the traditional Polynesian hierarchies continue to play a central role. It is often said that these communities have left little mark on New Caledonia in terms of heritage. But, while it is true that the architect generally garners the praise for major architectural achievements, what would the finished building be without the hard work of the labourers who ensure its permanence through the quality of their work?

## VI. RECENT IMMIGRATION: ARRIVALS FROM FRANCE

New Caledonia's 30-year postwar boom period ended with a very intense nickel boom between 1968 and 1972, the year which saw the start of a recession following decades of economic prosperity. That same year, Prime Minister Pierre Messmer sent a letter to Jean-François Deniau, then Secretary of State for the DOM-TOM, in which Messmer stated that "in the short and medium term, the mass immigration of French citizens or people from Overseas Departments (Reunion Island) should help avert this threat [of nationalist demands] by maintaining and improving the numerical ratio between communities". Accordingly, an estimated twenty thousand new immigrants, mostly from France, settled in New Caledonia from 1969 to 1976, either before or just after Messmer issued his directive.<sup>30</sup> This new community, dubbed "zoreille" (a term also used in Reunion Island) did not find it easy to carve out a place in the New Caledonia of the 1970s, a time when the Kanak had begun to demand recognition of their identity, and a time when the desire for a "real" New Caledonian identity was beginning to surface; yet these new arrivals brought with them skills and expertise then lacking. Immigration was brought to a halt by the decade of civil turmoil known as the "Événements" (Events, 1981-1989), but started up again in the wake of the Matignon-Oudinot Accords, and the Noumea Accord, which offered a guarantee of constitutional and therefore economic stability. However, as regards the Noumea Accord, people who arrived in New Caledonia after 1994 cannot vote in the referendums for or against New Caledonia's independence scheduled between 2018 and December 2021, and therefore they no longer "improve", to use Pierre Messmer's term, the relative balance between advocates of remaining within France and advocates of New Caledonian independence. The position of recent French arrivals in New Caledonia is therefore probably one of the least agreeable; denied some voting rights on what is after all French soil, unsure of their status as immigrants or expatriates, they sometimes serve as scapegoats for other longer established communities.

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29 On this aspect of relations between New Caledonia and French Polynesia, see Ch. Terrier, V. Defrance (eds.), 2012, *Nouméa-Papeete, 150 ans de liens et d'échanges*, Noumea, Ville de Nouméa.

30 P-C. Pantz, 2019, "Nouméa des booms, Nouméa plurielle", in V. Defrance (ed.), *Nouméa des booms, 1945-1975*, Noumea, Ville de Nouméa, p. 90-129.

## VII. FROM MIXED-RACE IDENTITIES TO SILENT CREOLIZATION

For Martinican poet Édouard Glissant, creolization, which is a process, should be distinguished from creolism, which is an established cultural fact, but also from the intermingling of races and cultures. Indeed, such intermingling or *metissage* is almost inevitable when communities from diverse backgrounds live together, even when forced to do so, in the same territory. Basically, it is a question of biological reality.<sup>31</sup>

Creolization is the process by which elements of different cultures blend together; it occurs when different races intermingle and is founded on mutual respect and recognition. Glissant employs the concept of a rhizome, a plant with an enmeshed root system, to expose the complexity of the creole identity and the notion of Relation. He also explains that creolization is not necessarily a good thing, but that it is the “future of the world which will be resisted by people who cling to their roots and take refuge in their nation, their genealogy, but it is the inevitable future”.<sup>32</sup>

Can this notion of creolization be applied to New Caledonia and contemporary New Caledonian society, a society which has been built on segregation, on meting out different treatment to its component parts and, for too long, on negation of the culture of its indigenous people? There are grounds for doubt, and so the term most commonly used to describe New Caledonian society today is “multicultural mosaic”.

Hence, different ethnicities would be symbolized by tesserae of different colours, set side by side but not mixing. It is precisely this model-based<sup>33</sup>, and therefore generalizing, approach to an analysis of the situation in New Caledonia which results in our society being reduced to a juxtaposition of communities unrelated to each other. As has been shown by recent studies, *metissage* plays an extremely important role in New Caledonia.<sup>34</sup> Of course, throughout our recent history, it has been regarded with greater and lesser degrees of approval or acceptance. Accordingly, although very common during the first half-century of the French colonial presence, due to the European population being almost exclusively male, it grew less and less acceptable in the first half of the 20th century, even though, paradoxically, the literature of the time gave pride of place to mixed-race heroes Jean M'Barai (Baudoux) and Yan-le-Métis (Laubreaux).<sup>35</sup> The theme of an impassioned but forbidden love between a young mixed-race girl from the Isle of Pines and a young New Caledonian of European heritage, working as temporary foreman at a sawmill, served as the story line for the novel *Wara*, published in 1932<sup>36</sup>,

31 See F. Angleviel (ed.), 2004, *Nouvelle-Calédonie, terre de métissages*, Paris, Les Indes Savantes.

32 F. Noudelmann, 2018, *Édouard Glissant – L'identité généreuse*, Paris, Flammarion.

33 And based on historical research such as the quantifying of convoys of labourers, the processing of censuses, based on a demographics and accounts-based rationale.

34 Ch. Terrier, 2004, “Calédoniens ou métis ?” in F. Angleviel (ed.), 2004. *La Nouvelle-Calédonie, terre de métissages ?*, Paris, Les Indes savantes.

35 The character Jean M'Barai is the hero of the short story *Jean M'Barai, le pêcheur de tripangs*, published in 1919 in Noumea in *Le Messager* newspaper. See G. Baudoux, 1972, *Les Blancs sont venus*, Noumea, Société d'études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, no. 2. See also A. Laubreaux, 1928, *Yan-le Métis*, Paris, Albin Michel. Regarding mixed-race characters and identity building in New Caledonian literature during the inter-war period, see V. Soula, 2014, *Histoire de la littérature de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, Karthala, p. 87-100.

36 A. Laubreaux, 1932, *Wara*, Paris, Albin Michel.

and in the early 1940s, Paul Bloc wrote the manuscript of his novel *Les Filles de la Néama*, where the issue of métissage is central.<sup>37</sup>

In his essay *Le Pays du non-dit*<sup>38</sup> (1991), Louis-José Barbançon sheds light on a social phenomenon he calls “mimicry” between the world labelled as Kanak and the world labelled as “Caldoche and associated” comprising the predominantly Asian communities stemming from colonial mobilities. He sees shared New Caledonian identity as emanating partly from our exceptional natural environment and from the Kanak relationship to it. Thus, it is precisely the permeability between communities alluded to above, so difficult to study and measure, which has been the root and source for what New Caledonians do today, in the same way and mostly without conscious thought. This holds true for the local accent, sense of humour, vocabulary, Kanak interjections so common in exclamations and, of course, non-verbal communication. All this intangible wealth is ultimately, and quite simply, the “Identity through relationship” so dear to Glissant, this “unstable, shifting, creative, fragile personality at the crossroads between oneself and others”.

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<sup>37</sup> The book was finally self-published in 1965.

<sup>38</sup> This essay marks a turning point in writings on local identity. Considered by some as a pamphlet when it first appeared, even as a loosely written diatribe, one is struck *a posteriori* by the accuracy of the author's analysis and arguments. Moreover, the ethnologist Jean Guiart gave it a glowing review. J. Guiart, 1993, “Le pays du non-dit : regards sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 97, p. 238-239. See also Ch. Terrier (ed.), 1994, *Être caldoche aujourd'hui*, Noumea, Île de Lumière.