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From expressions of identity to a portrait of Oceanian young people in New Caledonia: an overview of New Caledonian literature in French from 1853 to the present day

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How long has New Caledonian literature existed? Is it an emerging genre of literature? Why are books written in the French language in New Caledonia? Does New Caledonian literature have something special to tell us? All questions that reflect, even today, ignorance and lack of familiarity with New Caledonia's literary output, which has long endured the presumption that it has as yet no established form or structure, and suffered even more from ambiguity about where it stands between French literature and literature written in French. Moreover, the archipelago of New Caledonia has struggled to build and project a positive image, with the result that its artistic and cultural achievements are overlooked or simply dismissed.

And yet, Kanak cultural traditions constitute a rich and ancient heritage. In any event, the history of New Caledonia explains why letters, poems and novels have been written there in French for over 150 years, and only now in the Kanak languages. New Caledonia's literary output cannot boast a long and complex history comparable to European or Caribbean literature, or even to the ancestral orality in which Kanak culture is rooted, but the individual writings of which it is comprised can be gathered together to form a literary history¹.

New Caledonian literature springs from the country's specific history (that of a Melanesian land

¹ V. Soula, 2013, *Histoire littéraire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (1853-2005)*, Paris, publ. Karthala, coll. Littératures.

annexed by France in 1853, a penitentiary, a colony which would become an Overseas Territory (TOM), and finally a *sui generis* collectivity moving towards to self-determination); at the same time, New Caledonia's literature provides one of the best records of the history and culture of the New Caledonians, or rather their stories and cultural traditions, because it enduringly sets down and preserves knowledge of them. It is one of the most revealing vectors for emerging expressions of identity, how they have been exacerbated and also outdistanced, together with the concerns besetting the people of New Caledonia in the run-up to the second referendum on independence.

This chapter, in response to the questions posed hereinabove, will attempt to provide the keys needed for a better understanding of New Caledonian literature and a clearer picture of the issues involved by setting out a brief overview of its literary history. Our aim is to demonstrate how the originality of New Caledonian literature lies in the way it has taken shape in symbiosis with the historic growth and construction of New Caledonian society, from annexation by France in 1853 to the present day.

I. Beginnings of New Caledonian literature: writings by outsiders (1853-1914)

A land of oral tradition, New Caledonia, in company with all the islands of the South Pacific, was pitched into a new era as European exploration of the Pacific intensified in the 18th century: an era of evangelization, writing and also colonization.

1. Writings by missionaries

Missionaries, particularly the Marist Fathers, were the first Europeans to settle lastingly in New Caledonia and they were the archipelago's first French language "writers". Indeed, their ministry required them to report to the religious authorities on the establishment and development of their mission². The remoteness, loneliness and unfamiliarity of the missionaries' surroundings, and their experiences in encounters with the "natives" meant that writing became an essential part of their lives; their letters were to form a considerable body of correspondence, and they also wrote articles

² Among the informative reports intended for the religious authorities, the collection of missionary writings on the Kanak insurrection of 1878 should be noted: F. Bogliolo (ed.), 2000, *Jours de colère, jours d'Ataï, l'insurrection de 1878 d'après la correspondance des pères maristes*, Noumea, publ. Île de Lumière.

for the many religious newspapers and pamphlets circulating in the 19th century³.

As key eyewitnesses and careful observers of their environment, the missionaries were also to draft “scientific” works which, like the priest Père Lambert’s *Mœurs et Superstitions des Néo-Calédoniens*⁴, gave European readers new insight into the Kanak people and their way of life, and also local plant species and wildlife.

Although the “literary” nature of these writings is not always manifest, many of them hint at real literary ambition on the part of the Marist Fathers, aware as they were that their writings could potentially be published and disseminated in journals. Accordingly, their at times meticulous attention to style qualifies some of their writings as worthy inclusions in the field of literature.

The significance of such missionary writings in establishing the written form in New Caledonia is emphasized by their role both as a necessity and as establishing a new form of cultural expression, introduced perhaps but nevertheless enduring, in the territory. They still remain the vectors of the first portrayals and insights into the archipelago, its history, and “indigenous” culture. The missionaries were the first people to write about New Caledonia, from within its shores.

2. Writings by deportees

Writing was once again “introduced” by convicts, particularly by Communard political prisoners⁵ sentenced to deportation in New Caledonia⁶. Born of their desire to connect with Europe despite being excluded and exiled, writing was also their only means of doing so, in defiance of the strict censorship enforced by the Penitentiary Authorities⁷. The deportees included intellectuals sentenced to exile for their involvement in the Paris Commune; they laid the foundations for a poetic and lyrical writing style perpetuating, advancing and exemplifying the French literature of the second half of the 19th century. The Communards in exile continued to write political texts, and also to

³ There are many articles on New Caledonia in, amongst other publications, *La Revue des missions catholiques (Review of Catholic Missions)*, published from 1868 onwards.

⁴ R. P. Lambert, 1999, *Mœurs et Superstitions des Néo-Calédoniens* [1900], Noumea, Société d’études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie (SEHNC).

⁵ The name “Communards” is given to people who took part in the Paris Commune. A radical socialist, anti-religious, and revolutionary government that ruled Paris from 18 March to 28 May 1871, the Paris Commune was one of the consequences of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and of the siege of Paris by the German army; the republican Parisians also refused to accept the authority of the largely monarchist National Assembly.

⁶ L.-J. Barbançon, 2003, *L’Archipel des forçats, histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie (1863-1931)*, Lille, presse universitaire du Septentrion.

⁷ V. Buisson, 2001, *Lettres retenues, correspondances censurées des déportés de la Commune en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, publ. Le cherche midi.

develop a literary expression of exile and political struggle echoing the poetry of Victor Hugo. Some authors, such as Casimir Bouis and Louise Michel, reveal a truly filial poetic relationship with Hugo, sometimes even entering into correspondence with the author in exile in Guernsey. The gaze of these writers remains fixed on France and the barricades despite separation by thousands of kilometres of ocean and their farthest horizon being set by the Coral Sea.

Some works of penitentiary-related literature, such as Jean Allemane's *Mémoires d'un déporté de la Commune, des barricades au bagne*⁸, herald a change of focus to life in New Caledonia, betokening a new basis for literary endeavour. Dividing his memoirs into two parts, the first dedicated to his involvement in the Commune, the second to his experience of deportation, Allemane turns his gaze away from France to depict life in New Caledonia. Cut off from the reality of life in France, he describes another reality: the colonization process in which he plays a part. The author is no longer simply a detached observer but has become an actor, a witness, an "historian" and an author writing about life in New Caledonia.

Another example of this change of focus in "deportee" literature, *Légendes et chansons de gestes canaques* by Louise Michel⁹, is one of the major literary works inspired by New Caledonia to be written during the period. In the book, Louise Michel develops her interest in the Kanak world and reveals the poetic dimension of Melanesian oral literature. In *La Commune, histoire et souvenirs*¹⁰, she pursues this New Caledonian theme, describing what she learned from her conversations with Daoumi, her Kanak source and informant, and transcribing a song in the language of Lifou and in French. Louise Michel's interest in the Kanak people is further underlined by her denunciation of the violent repression of the 1878 rebellion by French troops and their Kanak auxiliaries. Her perception, insight and curiosity about this land of exile once again find expression in her beautifully evocative descriptions of New Caledonia's natural world. An idyllic vision of plants and landscape¹¹ such as this was fairly rare at a time when New Caledonia's natural environment was mostly perceived as a hostile embodiment of imprisonment in a tropical hell. Although, like many former Communards, Louise Michel was to return to France on completing her sentence, she bequeathed a compelling legacy of her time in New Caledonia.

⁸ J. Allemane, 1975, *Mémoires d'un déporté de la Commune* [1870], Noumea, SEHNC Publication, no. 15.

⁹ L. Michel, 1988, *Légendes et chants de geste canaques* [1885], Paris, les Éditions 1900.

¹⁰ L. Michel, 1999, *La Commune, Histoire et souvenirs* [1898], Paris, publ. La Découverte, coll. Poche Littérature.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

3. Colonial writings

Although first and foremost a penitentiary colony, New Caledonia was also a settler colony. Apart from missionaries and convicts, the first Europeans to settle there were government and military officials plus a number of adventurers; however, the policy adopted by Governor Feillet from 1894 to 1903 was designed to end New Caledonia's role as "convict" colony and "turn off the tap of dirty water" to encourage free settlement, to burnish the colony's image and make it a place of productive potential.

This was the backdrop to the development, in the 1890s, of a colonial literary movement which continued until the second World War. This considerable body of literature took many forms: personal memoirs, colonial novels, invocations, eyewitness accounts and poetry. Conscious of their role in the trailblazing experience of founding a new world and seeking to evoke their sense of remoteness, even exile, authors popped up at every level of local society, writing at length about the very nature of the colonial experience. One of the notable works by civilian authors is the collection of essays *A mes enfants calédoniens*¹² by Pauline de Aranda-Fouché, the wife of a surveyor and member of New Caledonia's modest middle classes; another is the account by Ferdinand Knoblauch of his collaboration with James Paddon, one of the first Europeans to freely settle in the archipelago, in *Six textes anciens sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie*,¹³ and also the novel by government-appointed doctor Jacques Nervat and his wife Marie, *Céline Landrot, fille de Pouembout*¹⁴, published in 1904. There was also no lack of works by military authors in the late 19th century, one of the defining events of the period being the Kanak rebellion of 1878. The most arresting works include *Après 1878, les souvenirs du Capitaine Kanappe*¹⁵ and, particularly, the *Carnets de campagne* by Michel Millet¹⁶, an illiterate gunner who took part in and witnessed the repression of the uprising led by Chief Ataï. These accounts not only provide evidence of the socially diverse character of the French military, but also highlight the need to write to bear witness and to exorcise doubts and fear engendered by the colonial experience.

¹² P. de Aranda-Fouché, 2003, *À mes enfants calédoniens*, Noumea, publ. CDP Scéren, coll. Témoignage points d'histoire no. 14.

¹³ B. Brou (ed.), 1988, *Six textes anciens sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Noumea, SEHNC no.42 publication.

¹⁴ M. and J. Nervat, 1987, *Céline Landrot, fille de Pouembout, roman calédonien* [1904], Noumea, publ. Société d'études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie.

¹⁵ Ch. Courtis, 1984, *Après 1878, les souvenirs du Capitaine Kanappe*, Noumea, publ. Société d'études historiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie.

¹⁶ M. Millet, 2004, *1878, Carnets de campagne en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Toulouse, publ. Anacharsis.

However, the works most clearly reflecting a literary identity rooted in New Caledonia during the colonial period are without doubt those published in the early 20th century by Marc Le Goupils, a senior teacher who left his Paris post to become a “Caledonian” coffee planter and settler¹⁷.

His use of the term “Caledonian” represents a literary and social turning point since it appears that Le Goupils was one of the first to apply this adjective to European settlers in New Caledonia – the term “New Caledonians” had so far been used to refer to the Kanaks, as seen in the book by R. P. Lambert. With the removal of the prefix “Néo” (New), the term shed its primary meaning and henceforth referred to European settlers. The word “Canaque” (with a francized spelling) then became the term used to refer to members of New Caledonia’s Melanesian population.

The early 20th century marked a decisive moment in both the history and literature of colonization, heralding as it did the advent of the “Caledonian” as a social and literary figure.

Just half a century had witnessed a fundamental change in literary focus. Literature “transported” to and sourced outside New Caledonia gradually grew local roots. The New Caledonian archipelago became a subject of literary interest in its own right, there was a change in the way it was portrayed, and the penitentiary hell gradually gave way to a colonial paradise whilst authors acquiesced in defining themselves as “Caledonians”.

II. The emergence of New Caledonian literature (1914-1970)

New Caledonian colonial society evolved and grew in confidence in the early 20th century, enjoying the economic benefits resulting from the discovery of garnierite and the opening of the first nickel smelter in 1910; the growth of indentured labour, the rise in immigration, and the shutting down of the penitentiary in 1931 also played a key role.

In terms of arts and culture, the trend was towards exoticism, paving the way for the first generation of New Caledonian writers and the first expressions of Kanak identity.

1. The “first generation” of New Caledonian authors

This period nonetheless appears as characterized by a somewhat ambiguous relationship between

¹⁷ M. Le Goupils, 1910, *Comment on cesse d’être colon, six années en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, publ. Bernard Grasset.

New Caledonia and France. The two world wars were to have a disruptive effect on the process of exploring “otherness” and the portrayal of colonial communities, with factors including the establishment of colonial battalions comprising a mixture of Kanak and New Caledonian soldiers, leading to a significant shift in the way each community perceived the other.

Moreover, although the European community’s self-identification as New Caledonian grew stronger during this period, New Caledonia’s accession to the status of Overseas Territory in 1946 was to give this community a real sense of being abandoned. Many of them no longer saw France as their true home country yet they sought refuge there. A paradox reflected in the lives of authors Alin Laubreaux and Jean Mariotti.

Works of literature could thenceforth be defined as New Caledonian since they were no longer works written by visitors from France. This literary current gave rise to two distinct but not irreconcilable approaches and perspectives, the first of which was inward-looking, the expression of an often critical gaze directed towards colonial society and its hybrid nature. In *Le Rocher à la voile*, Alin Laubreaux¹⁸ ferociously caricatures the bourgeoisie of early 20th century Noumea. Jean Mariotti’s autobiographical fiction *Au fil des jours, tout est peut-être inutile* takes the same fiercely critical stance¹⁹.

Very much alive to New Caledonia's multi-faceted reality, Mariotti was aware of his own ambiguous cultural identity (not really Kanak and not quite French). And so the issue of identity is a core theme in his writings, an expression of his sense of ambivalence, caught between two very different worlds: the challenge of being a “white” New Caledonian. Mariotti’s constantly wavering feelings about his own sense of identity led the author to spend much of his life as an exile in France.

The second form of literary approach taken by this “first generation” of New Caledonian writers can, unlike the first, be seen as “extroverted” or outwards-looking, directed towards the Other, and in particular the Kanak world. The realm of the penitentiary and the experiences of convicts or mixed-race people were also key themes, as seen in the writings of Georges Baudoux and also, to a

¹⁸ A. Laubreaux, 1996, *Le Rocher à la voile* [1930], Noumea, publ. Grain de Sable.

¹⁹ J. Mariotti, 1929, *Au fil des jours. Tout est peut-être inutile*, Paris, publ. Flammarion.

lesser extent, Francis Carco²⁰.

New Caledonian literature thus reflected society as it was at the time, fragmented and divided yet revealing a permeability embodied by characters of mixed-race. A distinctively New Caledonian form of literary expression was shaped by the porous relationship between social spheres in the country.

New Caledonia was now portrayed from within, and authors offered their readers clearer, more accurate and intimate insight through depictions of the pre-colonial era. They emphasized the importance of orality and Kanak oral tradition, seeking to give the written form an oral character by transcribing accents and expressions and also by the *mise en abyme* of narratives²¹.

Writers were thus fascinated by the Kanak world, which became one of the main themes of New Caledonian literature in the first half of the 20th century. Taking the Other into consideration meant questioning oneself, one's presence in the country and one's roots.

2. What about writing in the Kanak world?

Evangelization paved the way for increased literacy amongst the Kanak population during the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. Many missionaries working in indigenous communities developed a keen linguistic and ethnological interest in Kanak culture; Pastor Maurice Leenhardt, in particular, published decisive research into the A'jië language spoken in the Houaïlou region, and encouraged the development of Kanak writing and literature in the Main Island.

The first Kanak "writers" were inspired by Leenhardt's work and influence. Indeed, he encouraged the *natas* (native pastors) at his Do Néva mission to write. As early as 1920, Bwêÿöuu Ęrijiji, one of the *natas*, transcribed A'jië discourses, legends and other elements of oral tradition in notebooks²² which were later translated into French by Maurice or Raymond Leenhardt. Other pastors also took to the pen, including Waya Gorodé – father of the female Kanak author Déwé Gorodé – who wrote *Souvenir d'un Néo-Calédonien ami de Maurice Leenhardt*, a still unpublished

²⁰ G. Baudoux, 1952, *Légendes canaques, Ils avaient vu des hommes blancs*, (vol. 2), Paris, Nouvelles Éditions Latines and G. Baudoux, 1985, *Jean M'Barai, le pêcheur de tripangs* [1920], in *Les Blancs sont venus*, vol.1, Noumea, SEHNC no. 2 publication.

²¹ G. Baudoux, *Les Vieux savaient tout, ils avaient vu les hommes blancs*, *op. cit.* and also Paul Bloc, 1998, *Les Confidences d'un cannibale* [1965], Noumea, publ. Île de Lumière.

²² S. Aramiou and J. Euritein (eds.), 2002 & 2003, *Pèci i Bwêÿöuu Ęrijiji, Cahiers de Boesou Eurijisi*, Noumea, FELP/ADCK publication, coll. Bwêwêÿê no. 7 & 8.

memoir. The fact that Gorodé wrote in French is indicative of a desire to reach a public beyond the Paicî linguistic and cultural sphere.

Histoire et psychologie des Mélanésiens, the first work in French by a Kanak author, began life as an academic thesis written in 1965 by the priest Apollinaire Anova-Ataba, and published in 1984 under the title *D'Ataï à l'indépendance*²³.

Before it was even published, this text was rapidly recognized as significant; it was widely and attentively read in Kanak intellectual circles from the end of the 1960s. Copies from the first print-run quickly sold out. The literary impact of Anova's work appears considerable but remains somewhat difficult to gauge. Nor is it easy to assess its literary value. However, some passages, including the story of the 1878 rebellion and the description of Chief Ataï, possess authentic literary value in their epic portrayal of events, imbuing them with mythical or legendary status. It is also noteworthy that Anova included poems he had written, confirming his status as one of first Kanak writers in French. His poems would also have a major influence on the poetry of Déwé Gorodé in *Sous les cendres des conqués*²⁴, seen particularly in her use of slang expressions, frequent use of the infinitive and even her syncopated rhythms.

Anova's work is crucial to serious reflection on the use of the French language as a vector for expressing Kanak thinking, Kanak identity and Kanak claims. He plays a *de facto* fundamental role in the development of creative contemporary Kanak literature written in French.

The first half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of New Caledonian literature in parallel with a heightening awareness of both European and Kanak identity, themes which grew in scope and structure until the 1970s.

III New Caledonian literature in a time of political crisis (1970-1989)

The New Caledonian literary landscape was to change significantly between 1970 and the end of the 1980s. Literary expression was striding forwards at the same time as a social and political crisis was overwhelming the archipelago.

With social and ethnic divisions still very much in evidence, New Caledonian society underwent a

²³ A. Anova-Ataba, 1984, *D'Ataï à l'indépendance*, Noumea, Édipop.

²⁴ D. Gorodé, 1984, *Sous les cendres des conqués*, Noumea, Édipop.

period of heightened tension engendered by the enduring economic marginalization of the Kanak community, and by the need of each community to assert its own identity. This volatile situation heralded a period of violent conflict from 1984 to 1989, variously designated a “civil war” or the “Events”.

In literary terms, these years of turmoil were marked by the rise of Kanak literature, with writing driven by politics and the media tending to overshadow creative writing; the voices of writers belonging to hitherto silent immigrant communities also began to make themselves heard, determined to assert their own right to a place in the literary landscape against the backdrop of the social and political context of the time.

Paradoxically, the urgent political crisis had a dampening effect on New Caledonian literary production, while at the same time paving the way for a new approach to literary expression, and encouraging the flowering of new genres.

1. The advent of Kanak literature

Gaining in scope and freedom, works by Kanak authors in the French language became a vehicle for cultural and political demands, before they established their authentic status as literature in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of plays and poetry. These written works by Kanak authors by no means represent a negation of the oral heritage or even of the native language of their authors, quite the contrary.

The play-pageant *Kanake*, co-written by Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Georges Dobbelaere and performed in September 1975 at the Melanesia 2000 Festival, is a key work of the period²⁵. It represents one of the few texts written by the Kanak leader, better known as an orator, and presents a synthesis in dramatic form of Kanak political demands at that time. Moreover, it constitutes a pivotal work of literature as the very first evocation of the mythical Teâ Kanake (the first man, founding ancestor of the Kanak people), and also in giving prominence to specifically Kanak cultural traits such as clan organization, totemic hierarchy and the use of Kanak speech. Indeed, the dramatic form of the play-pageant references oral tradition. A denunciation of colonial violence and the negation of Kanak identity and a call for a Melanesian “awakening”, *Kanake* is the literary

²⁵ Designed and organized by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, with French government support, this festival was the first major cultural event showcasing Kanak culture in its most diverse shapes and forms (traditional dances and songs, sculptures, weaving, etc. from all over New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands) for the general public.

declaration of the man who would rapidly become the most charismatic of pro-independence leaders. Clearly recognizing the legitimacy of Kanak culture and ending with a “plea for the future”, *Kanake* set the tone and spirit, as early as 1975, which would be embodied in the “common destiny” project set out in the Noumea Accord of 1998.

However, Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s vision as reflected in *Kanake* failed to prevent a political crisis. Kanak poet Déwé Gorodé emerged as a new literary, and political, female personality in the wake of the pro-independence struggles of the 1980s.

Her collection of poems, *Sous les cendres des conqués*, broke away from traditions set by Kanak authors writing in French because, in Déwé Gorodé’s hands, the French language became a symbol of commitment, an art form and, simultaneously, an intermingling of the literary and the political. A trailblazer, she set out to use the tools of French literary expression to attack colonialism, in a sort of “literary putsch”.

Sous les cendres des conqués marked the arrival of a powerful new voice decisively asserting the claim of Kanak writers, and a Kanak woman writer in particular, to take their rightful place in New Caledonia’s literary, cultural and political landscape.

Literature, closely linked to society, reflected social change in its own evolution, whilst furthering a global renewal.

2. The saga novel and minority voices

Narrative fiction, following on from the colonial novels of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a literary constant until the 1980s. Times change, society evolves and the celebration of colonial achievement was replaced by a passion for tracing New Caledonia’s history which would become a key theme in popular fiction, reflected not only in the saga novels of Jacqueline Sénès²⁶ but also in the “noir” thrillers written by Alain Fournier under the initials A.D.G.²⁷

Fiction was also a form explored by writers from historic minority immigrant communities, thus reflecting New Caledonia’s new image as an Overseas Territory. Jean Vanmai’s *Chan Dang, les*

²⁶ J. Sénès, 1987, *Terre violente*, Paris, Editions de la Seine, coll. Succès du Livre.

²⁷ A. Fournier aka A.D.G., 1988, *Les Billets nickelés*, Paris, publ. Gallimard, coll. Série Noire.

*Tonkinois au temps colonial*²⁸ was the first such work. Vanmai gave a voice to the descendants of Indochinese indentured labourers and paved the way for writers like Dany Dalmayrac²⁹ and Marc Bouan³⁰, who respectively evoked the experiences of descendants of Japanese and Indonesian indentured labourers in New Caledonia.

Fiction writing offered a means of preserving and passing on memories, of asserting the identity of such minorities, legitimizing their place in New Caledonian society and also of calling attention to their integration.

3. New Caledonian literature and political crisis

Poetry greatly flourished during these unsettled times. With the 1984 publication of Déwé Gorodé's *Sous les cendres des conqués*³¹, poetry heralded a general resurgence in New Caledonian literature, and also appeared as the literary form best suited to expressing the intensity of responses to the political crisis and the violent conflict then overshadowing New Caledonia. Two key figures dominated New Caledonian poetry in the 1980s: Déwé Gorodé and Nicolas Kurtovitch, two kindred souls who each expressed through their poetry the upheavals, loss and sorrow suffered throughout the social and political crisis³².

Nicolas Kurtovitch published *Vision d'insulaire*³³ in 1983 and *Souffles de la nuit*³⁴ in 1985; his work was instrumental in bringing New Caledonians of European origin to a truly profound change in perspective. Kurtovitch, born to a long-established New Caledonian settler family, rejected the old divisions and the need to legitimize his presence in the country. He instead attempted to demonstrate that "otherness" – Kanak "otherness" – should be seen as an opportunity for encounters and not as a source of fear. Despite being stamped by colonization, his work can be considered as

²⁸ J. Vanmai, 1982, *Chân Dàng, les Tonkinois de Calédonie au temps colonial* [1980], Noumea, SEHNC no. 24 publication.

²⁹ D. Dalmayrac, 2003, *Les Sentiers de l'espoir kanak et nippo-kanak*, Noumea, publ. Ecume du Pacifique.

³⁰ M. Bouan, 2003, *L'Écharpe et le kriss*, Paris, publ. Publibook.

³¹ D. Gorodé, 1984, *Sous les cendres des conqués*, op. cit.

³² V. Soula, 2019, "La poésie contemporaine de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et les « Événements » de 1984-1989 : difficultés d'un discours (poétique) du bouleversement et du deuil", in *Études francophones*, University of Louisiana at Lafayette review, vol. 30.

³³ N. Kurtovitch, 1983, *Vision d'Insulaire*, Paris, publ. Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

³⁴ N. Kurtovitch, 1985, *Souffles de la nuit*, Paris, publ. Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

resolutely post-colonial³⁵ insofar as it attempts to do away with the requirement for literature to be sourced in the rooting of peoples.

The first *La Brousse en folie*³⁶ comic strip books by Bernard Berger were published in 1984, at the height of the political conflict in New Caledonia. Berger's biting and colourful caricatures of New Caledonian outback society provided an outlet for the social and political tensions dividing communities in the country. The *La Brousse en folie* comic strips met with immediate and enduring popular success, and the series rapidly achieved cult status amongst New Caledonians of every age and ethnic origin. In addition to using self-mockery and humour to defuse the atmosphere of tension and conflict, the comic books and caricatures of society succeeded in countering the communitarian views then popular.

La Brousse en folie provides a stylized portrayal of outback society based on four characters encapsulating each community (the Kanak, the "Caldoche" - outback descendant of European settlers, the Vietnamese guy - the Asian immigrant, and the "Zoreille" - the recently arrived incomer from France). Berger uses exaggerated character traits and clichés to unite people in laughing at themselves and at other people, each community getting an equal dose of mockery. As portrayed by Bernard Berger, New Caledonian society appears as united despite its inner diversity. Berger also conjures a New Caledonian culture shared by ordinary people by having his characters speak in typically New Caledonian French slang, engage in shared popular activities: hunting deer or "roussettes"³⁷, fishing, the cult of the siesta, television, fascination with American culture, etc. In this way, Berger offers an authentically New Caledonian literary alternative to the identity-based conflict taking shape in the 1980s.

The literature of the 1970s and 1980s increasingly reflected the complex issues affecting New Caledonia: the struggle for independence, minorities making their voices heard, efforts to avoid the pitfalls of violence, and the quest for a way out of conflict affirming authors' commitment to the process of "common destiny" set out by the Noumea Accord in 1998.

IV Renewal of New Caledonian forms of expression and collaborative writing (1990-2005)

³⁵ J-M. Moura, 1999, *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, coll. "Quadrige. Manuels".

³⁶ B. Berger, 1984, "Premières feintes de Tonton Marcel", *La Brousse en folie*, vol. 1, Noumea, publ. La Brousse en folie.

³⁷ Species of large fruit bat.

The signing of the Matignon Accords in 1988 by Jacques Lafleur and Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the two charismatic leaders of the “loyalist” and pro-independence movements marked the end of the period known as the “Events” and the start of a new decade characterized by rapid cultural development. New Caledonia’s creative arts and literature embraced greater diversity. The people of New Caledonia were henceforth alive to the unique nature of the autonomous status their country had acquired in the 1990s. In 1998, with the Noumea Accord, the official recognition of Kanak culture by the French government and acknowledgement of the need to establish a common destiny, New Caledonia became a sort of institutional and intercultural laboratory.

The writers of New Caledonia were quick to engage with the intercultural project underpinning the Matignon-Oudinot Accords and Noumea Accord; and although poetry remained a key literary form, new genres such as plays, essays and novellas flourished. A literary metadiscourse also began to take shape, influenced by a number of writers and, in particular, by academic research developed in conjunction with the French University of the Pacific, later to become the University of New Caledonia.

1. Kanak literature written in French

Although, in the 1990s, works by Kanak authors were fairly low profile, they now firmly asserted their place as part of French language literature. Drawing heavily on the Kanak cultural heritage, transposing Melanesian oral traditions into literary texts, Kanak authors opened up new ground, moving beyond the purely political to proclaim a culture enshrined in a common destiny.

Their writings also take a freshly critical view of Kanak society and its struggles to give structure and meaning to custom and traditions in a contemporary environment. Thus, contemporary Kanak society is subjected to harsh scrutiny in Pierre Gope’s plays *Où est le droit ? Okorenitit ?*³⁸, *Le Dernier crépuscule*³⁹ and also *La Parenthèse*⁴⁰.

Essays gave New Caledonian literature a more personal perspective. The return to more peaceful times also gave writers freedom to evoke memories and speech, influenced too by the trauma generated by the violent conflicts of the 1980s. Louis-José Barbançon’s *Le Pays du non-dit*, an iconic and pioneering collection of essays exploring New Caledonia, was followed by the same

³⁸ P. Gope, 2002, *Où est le droit ? , Okorenitit ?*, Noumea, publ. Grain de Sable.

³⁹ P. Gope, 2001, *Le Dernier crépuscule*, Noumea, publ. Grain de Sable.

⁴⁰ P. Gope, 2005, *La Parenthèse*, Noumea, publ. Traversées.

author's *La Terre du lézard*; of high literary quality, Barbançon's works reveal a writer-historian laying claim, through his writing, to an oral culture shared with the Kanak world, and attempting to end rivalry between cultures and memories.

2. Collaborative writing

The shift in New Caledonian cultural life initiated in 1998 with the recognizing of Kanak culture by the preamble to the Noumea Accord and the inauguration of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre was a call to the people of New Caledonia to follow the path of "common destiny" and build a shared citizenship. It was a message which rang loud and clear in arts and cultural circles. Artists and writers were quick to engage and bring the project to life.

1997 saw the start of symbolic artistic collaborations, including Kanak visual artist Micheline Neporon's illustrations for Nicolas Kurtovitch's collection of poems entitled *Avec le masque*⁴¹. In 1999, Kanak poet Déwé Gorodé and New Caledonian poet Nicolas Kurtovich co-wrote *Dire le vrai*⁴², *Tell the truth*, without question one of the most iconic works of this period; in 2002, Pierre Gope and Nicolas Kurtovitch collaborated on the play *Les Dieux sont borgnes*⁴³.

Literature takes shape in a symbolic space which, central to the process of intercultural dialogue, plays a crucial role in the quest for a common destiny, reflecting a desire to banish old divisions and to build a literary – and artistic – community which is quick to adopt free exchange and openness as its *credo*. Literary roots thus take on a new meaning, a unique and yet collective engagement in time and space, freed from any rivalry between peoples and cultures.

V. New aspirations and Oceanian urban expression (2000-2017)

The primary concern seen in the literature of the 2000s, freed from the shackles of community and identity-related conflict, was New Caledonia's need to open up to the rest of the world.

1. The literature of movement

The theme of the "Other" and engaging to the point of merging with the "Other" were central to this literary revival. However, this "otherness" no longer focussed on New Caledonia's other

⁴¹ N. Kurtovitch, 1997, *Avec le masque*, Paris, publ. Les Cahiers du Pont sous l'eau.

⁴² D. Gorodé and Nicolas Kurtovitch, 1999, *Dire le vrai, Tell the truth*, Noumea, publ. Grain de Sable.

⁴³ P. Gope and N. Kurtovitch, 2002, *Les Dieux sont borgnes*, Noumea, publ. Grain de Sable.

communities. New Caledonian literature, driven by talents such as Nicolas Kurtovich and Frédéric Ohlen, amongst others, aspired to broader horizons, with novellas and poetry reflecting a quest for universality. Without questioning their own roots, they sought inspiration beyond New Caledonia, looking elsewhere (Australia, Japan, Europe, etc.) and embracing the concept of movement⁴⁴. The appeal of travel, of remote places, is a commonplace in literature. In the context of New Caledonia, this appeal has another dimension insofar as it serves as confirmation that local literature has moved beyond the assertion of identity to pursue intercultural issues beyond the limits of New Caledonia itself. Positioning themselves as travelling writers, the authors of the baby boom generation set out, without turning their backs on New Caledonian history⁴⁵, to break definitively with the colonial heritage and its role in defining their identity.

2. Portrait of a young generation of Oceanian New Caledonians

A new generation of writers, born in the 1980s, was emerging at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s. Too young to have experienced the “Events”, this “Matignon generation⁴⁶”, as journalist and documentary writer Anne Pitoiset dubbed them, grew up bathed in the intercultural *credo* of their parents’ generation. They drew a portrait of New Caledonian society which, although less polarized than that of their fathers, was nevertheless complex and violent, often characterized by discontinuity.

Paul Wamo, a leading light of this new generation of authors, quickly made a name for himself as the mouthpiece of a new Kanak identity, resolutely young, urban, apolitical and at ease with globalization⁴⁷. Wamo was born in Lifou in 1981; in 1983, his parents moved to work in Rivière Salée, a suburb of Noumea. Refusing to be labelled, Paul Wamo used slam poetry⁴⁸ – a form of performance poetry that combines the elements of performance, writing, competition, and audience participation – to give voice to a generation of Kanaks who, torn from their traditional and customary environment by the rural exodus of their elders, were struggling to define their identity. The uprooted generation described by Paul Wamo ran the risk of “amnesia⁴⁹”, of forgetting their

⁴⁴ The titles of their works often reference walking, traveling, distant places: F. Ohlen - *Le marcheur insolent*, *La peau qui marche* and N. Kurtovich - *Le Piéton du Dharma*.

⁴⁵ F. Ohlen, 2014, *Quintet*, Paris, publ. Gallimard, coll. Continent noir.

⁴⁶ “Génération Matignon”, documentary film by L. Ciwell and A. Pitoiset, 2012, AAA Productions.

⁴⁷ P. Wamo, 2005, *Le Pleurnicheur*, Noumea, publ. L’Herbier de feu.

⁴⁸ The concept of slam poetry originated in the 1980s in Chicago and spread to other large urban centres. C. Vorger, 2016, *Slam, une poétique*, Valenciennes, Presses universitaires, coll. Les Belles Lettres.

⁴⁹ P. Wamo, 2008, “Amnésie traditionnelle”, in *J’aime les mots*, publ. Grain de Sable.

roots, yet at the same time were part of a trend freeing them from an identity at times experienced as a burden in a globalized society⁵⁰.

Vincent Vuibert, another major author of the 2010s, constructed his narrative in the form of chronicles, rooting it in an authentic and convincing social reality. In his book *Chroniques de la mauvaise herbe*, he depicts an urban community relegated to the geographic and economic fringes of New Caledonia's capital city⁵¹. Vincent Vuibert evokes a young multicultural generation which yet reveals signs of enduring and significant social divisions. His book describes a fringe multiculturalism shaped by young lead characters who, dabbling with delinquency, remain relegated to the edges of the city and society. Youth itself appears as a form of relegation, a marginalization. These young New Caledonians appear trapped by ancient divisions and the weight of the past – shadows of the penitentiary, colonization, inter-community conflicts and past struggles – which they cannot throw off.

This fresh – and young – image of New Caledonian literature would not be complete without reference to the role of Oceanian women. Following the example set by Déwé Gorodé, Oceanian women are not only preeminent as writers but have become a focus of literature. The 2010s also saw female concerns given greater emphasis, with female characters taking a leading role, moving beyond the sphere of “women's literature”⁵².

Novels and novellas by Déwé Gorodé, Noëlla Poemate, Waej Genin-Juni and Isa Qala evoke with harsh forthrightness the often tragic fate of young Oceanian women⁵³. Contemporary fiction highlights their torn identity, their physical, mental and spiritual suffering. Trapped between compliance with custom, arranged marriages⁵⁴, the inevitable independence required by an urban

⁵⁰ V. Soula, “La littérature calédonienne de la nouvelle génération : entre expression(s) identitaire(s) et dépassement”, actes en ligne du colloque “La Nouvelle-Calédonie : un projet multiculturel ?”, article to be published in 2021.

⁵¹ E. Banaré, “D'Écrire une ville : géocritique de Nouméa à partir des brèches romanesques”, in the *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, vol. 19, December 2016.

⁵² The Kanak writer Léopold Hnacipan also devotes much of his work to Kanak women and seeks to involve readers in questioning the place of women in the contemporary Melanesian world. L. Hnacipan and N. Poemate, 2011 *Oleti, oleti !*, Boulouparis, publ. Écrire en Océanie.

⁵³ V. Soula, “Femmes écrivains du Pacifique francophone: tressages littéraires contemporains”, article to be published in *Small Islands, Big Issues. Pacific Perspectives on the Ecosystem of Knowledge*, publ. Peter Lang.

⁵⁴ W. Wahetra, 2017, *Que la parole s'accomplisse*, Boulouparis, publ. Écrire en Océanie. Waej Genin-Juni “Hula”, 2015, *Nouvelles de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, publ. Magellan.

lifestyle⁵⁵ and the way it cuts them off from their families, their identity and their culture, finding their own place is a major challenge.

Conclusion

Deeply rooted in the social – and political – context of the archipelago, New Caledonian literature reflects a multifaceted society built on colonial foundations, which underwent a transformation unique in the annals of decolonization. It constitutes an unusual and specific literary current which has made very little mark on the overall landscape of French language literature. This rapid – and incomplete – overview of New Caledonia’s literary history aims to show clearly that New Caledonian literature can now transition from a supposedly developing art form and achieve acceptance as a literary heritage. Both elucidating and responding to the history of a country moving towards its destiny, writers – like all artists, often the first to intuit social change – highlight key concerns and issues which should without doubt play a greater role in informing New Caledonian political debate and social perspectives at a time when the country is called upon to determine its own future.

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⁵⁵ Noëlla Poemate, 2015, *La Fille de la ville*, Boulouparis, publ. Écrire en Océanie.

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