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Informal session: Villages and Their Alters in Melanesian Social Worlds

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Mine and tribe in New Caledonia

Locality, identity and resource politics

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The Melanesian (Kanak) 'traditional village' in New Caledonia has been the object of many ethnographic descriptions in the past and some controversy regarding its size in relation to demographic and political trends, the nature of its authorities (chieftaincy), its pre-colonial transformations and its 'mobility'. The French military conquest and administrative colonization (from 1853) profoundly disrupted the social and spatial organization of this territory through a violent policy of settlement (convicts and free settlers), forced labor and racial and spatial segregation. Although the settlement policy was not as successful as proclaimed by the French authorities at the time, the resulting colonial society was enduringly structured along a strong legal and land dualism, opposing white settlers (citizens) and autochthonous populations (subjects under the *Code de l'indigénat*, 1887-1946). The reservation policy, the restriction of people's movements, the narrowness of the interface between tribe (administrative unit created by 1867 for the sake of indirect rule) and colonial administration (and 'external world'), which was limited to the Kanak administrative chief and White constable (i.e. the *gendarme* who acted as *syndic des affaires indigènes*), were all factors that resulted in the inward-orientation of tribal social life as compared to the outward/network-like orientation of the pre-colonial clans and settlements. Later, in the 1950s, the Kanak movement would reverse the sense of domination and dispossession embodied in the reserve/tribe nexus and use it as the home-base for cultural, political and land claims.

However the history of settlement, land confiscation and localities (village/tribe) is not homogenous across the entire territory of New Caledonia, and I will focus on the specific case of Thio, which is significant if not 'representative'.

Thio is a municipality located in south-central New Caledonia at the junction of two linguistic areas (*xârâcùù* and *xârâgurè*). Its colonial history since the 1870s has been structured around the encounter of mining and livestock pioneer fronts, resulting in massive displacements of the Melanesian autochthonous populations who were driven to the upper parts of the valleys, confined in reservations and subject to military repression (the wars of 1878-79 involved some important clans of the Thio upper valleys). By the 1890s, mining (and to a lesser extent settler agriculture) generated

an inflow of labor force from France (convicts and white settlers) and Dutch Indonesia, French Indochina, Japan and the New Hebrides (also from Loyalty Islands and later, from the 1960s, from Wallis & Futuna). However, viewed from a local perspective, the reservation policy (1880-1900) was not a homogenous tidal wave corresponding to systematic planning, although it was the expression of a deliberate policy (with the creation of the *tribu* by 1867 and administrative chieftaincy – *grand chef/petit chef* – in 1887). It is possible to refer here to a micropolitics of reservation resulting from the interaction and conflicting interests of the white settlers, mining companies, Christian missions, colonial bureaucracy and Kanak strategies. The spatial distribution of the reserves in Thio, as it stabilized in period 1910-1950, expresses this interplay with some reserves located in the upper and remote parts of lateral valleys (the valley floor being occupied by settlers' cattle and coffee plantations) and others situated in the bottom of the main valley and around churches. A small number of large livestock stations (with the patron's house, Kanak and white stockmen, Javanese workers) between the reserves and the core village constituted a third component of the residential structure in Thio, which was scattered around the main valley and the lower parts of lateral valleys. The colonial local geography was thus reorganized around new administrative and property boundaries (commune, reserve, stock fences) and infrastructure (church, school, road).

In other words, from a long-term perspective, it is possible to observe a complex and pervasive tendency towards social and spatial fragmentation, which was expressed and reinforced in a series of localized oppositions that structure the landscape (in addition to the original opposition between 'the bush' and 'the city' – city meaning: Nouméa – at national level): i.e. between (white) village and (Kanak) tribe, which partially superposed the opposition between tribe and Christian mission and between tribe/village and mine (workers used to live in compounds on the mine until the early 1950s). Identity boundaries do not simply reflect a 'nested identities' model, they were shaped by frontier movements, ethnic categorizations, residential and legal segregation, occupational lines (stockmen, mine workers) and, later (from the 1950s), infrastructure policy (roads, schools, SLN houses for workers) and the start of the Kanak movement, which originated from the reserve as a paradoxical stronghold for the assertion of cultural, political and land claims. The 1970s was a turning point in the quest for independence and the land reform launched in 1978 and which was boosted by the political agreements (Matignon-Oudinot, 1989 and Nouméa, 1998) that followed the tensions of 1984-1988. (The local euphemism to designate this quasi civil war is "*les événements*".) Thio was on the front line in this regard and the violent clashes of 1984-85 (together with the end of the 1968-1972 nickel boom) resulted in a profound transformation of residential and sociopolitical patterns in Thio as many white, Indonesian, Wallisian and Tahitian people (SLN workers and shopkeepers) left the village, and SLN houses in Thio village and mission were occupied by Kanak people (SLN

headquarters on the coast were burned). As a result, it was possible to observe tendency towards a kind of 'de-urbanization' of the central village of Thio (along with the rise of the municipality as a political and administrative instance from 1969).

Although segregation has not simply disappeared, the current life worlds (and 'action space') of the Kanak extend across some of these occupational and residential lines. New forms of mobility (between the mine and agriculture, tribe and city) also rely on multi-residential strategies, which can function as exit options in the event of conflicts at clan or tribe level (which tend to re-emerge in the course of the land reform, thus challenging a unitary Kanak 'ethno-nationalism' by highlighting clan-level affiliations or localized/intra-Kanak autochthonous/stranger oppositions). This is the locality-mobility-identity nexus that I intend to explore in this paper (and this research, a work in progress).