

## Connecting History and Drama in Oceania: The Emergence of a New Caledonian Drama

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to give information about the staging of three plays: *Kanake*, *The Arrest of the Japanese Man* and *The Gods are one-eyed*. Their authors who were born and bred in New Caledonia have always shown a particular interest in their cultural heritage and the relations among the New Caledonian communities. Their plays are also political events because they deal with subjects which had been totally obliterated so far. They provide access to a new social awareness in New Caledonia.

**KEYWORDS:** New Caledonia; National Identity; Drama; Travelling theory

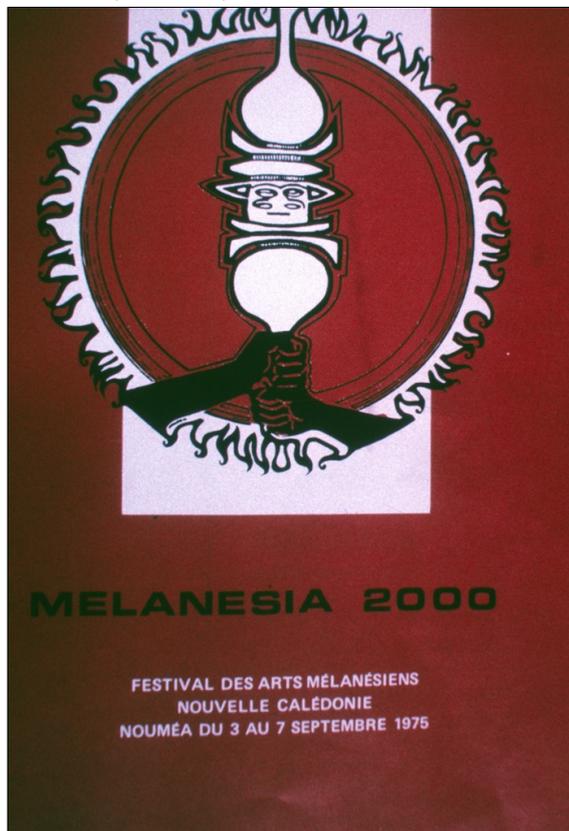
Ideas and theories travel — from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another.

This is a quotation from the first sentence of travelling theory, the well-known essay written by Edward Said (226). The theoretician claims that there is no 'enclosing domains called literature, with clear outer boundaries' (229) and 'no intrinsically closing limit' (230) to the field of the history of ideas. He also examines how a theory or an idea may evolve according to different circumstances, and he illustrates his point with Goldmann's use of Lukacs's theory. He then compares Michel Foucault's idea that 'power is everywhere' with Chomsky's views that the nature of power has to be analysed in our present societies, and so has the nature of resistance. Edward Said concludes:

in human history, there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and it is obviously what makes change possible, limits power in Foucault's sense and hobbles the theory of that power (247).

In the light of these comments upon the modification of dominating systems, however rigid the structures of a society may be, I'd like to show how contemporary dramatic literature has come to mean something special in the Caledonian cultural and political context. It seems interesting to

examine the new ideas that some plays convey, their impact upon the dominating systems and the cultural framework of New Caledonia, for I believe like Edward Said that the history of ideas has no definite limits, and therefore drama may have a role to play in the forging of new ideas and new behaviours. I'd like to cast a light upon the Melanesian worldview as expressed in the plays written by two Kanak playwrights, Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Pierre Gope, and the inside view given by the plays written by two Caledonian brothers of European origins, Nicolas and Ismet Kurtovitch. Remember that the main island in New Caledonia measures 16,750 square kilometres and that the last census of 2004 counted 240,000 inhabitants. It means that any event can have a deep impact on this sparsely populated island. This is what I want to show as regards the first Melanesian festival, Melanesia 2000 that took place on the outskirts of Noumea, at Tina, in 1975.



*Figure 1. Advertising poster for the Melanesia 2000 festival, held 3-7 September 1975 in Nouméa.*

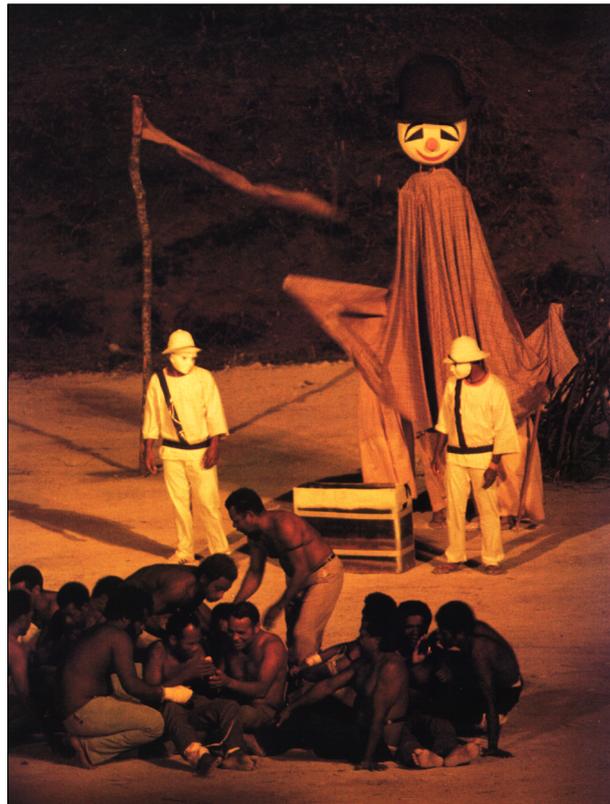
Another cultural event that had also great significance was the weekend devoted to the commemoration of the first Japanese immigrants, a cultural event organized by the ADCK cultural center in August 2006. A play written by Ishmet Kurtovitch, *L'arrestation du Japonais*, was performed

for the occasion. A few years earlier, in 2001, Ishmet's brother, Nicolas, wrote a play with the Kanak writer, Pierre Gope, entitled *Les dieux sont borgnes*, a burlesque, fanciful version of the death of Captain Cook which was well-received in Noumea. My opinion is that *Kanake*, *L'arrestation du Japonais* and *Les dieux sont borgnes* contribute to the questioning of the dominating systems that rule New Caledonia and the sets of values that prevail on the island.

*Melanesia 2000* was the name given to the first festival whose purpose was to show various representations of Melanesian art. If we bear in mind that at the 1976 census, the population totaled only 133,000 people in New Caledonia, the figures given about *Melanesia 2000* will speak for themselves. 2,000 contributors helped in the organization of the festival and 50,000 visitors, mainly Melanesians, came to visit the various exhibitions and watched the play *Kanake*. In fact it is a creation myth interspersed with songs and dances performed by groups that belong to the various cultural areas of New Caledonia. According to the witnesses of the time, it was the first time that Melanesians from New-Caledonia, and the Loyalty Islands, had had the occasion to be all together and compare their customs, languages, dances, songs and artifacts. It is now a recognized fact that *Melanesia 2000* was the cultural event that paved the way for a gradual historical reassessment and self-assertion achieved by the Melanesian community. The breakthrough that *Melanesia 2000* made lay in the fact that the subject of the play, *Kanake*, was the first cultural attempt to counterbalance the colonialist interpretation of the presence of French people on the island. The play itself written by Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Georges Dobbelaere, staged the arrival of the French missionaries, traders and soldiers in New Caledonia and represented them by three huge puppets while actors mimed the French annexation of the island. This dramatic interpretation came as a shock among Caledonians of European origins and metropolitan French people. At least, this is the comment we can hear in the film that was shot by Georges Ravat and Guy Chanel during the festival and the comment we can read in most accounts of the festival. The film commentator raises an interesting question when he wonders why the Kanak organisers of the festival have agreed to the French representatives' addition of the third part of the show which is made up of slides and extracts of films showing road works, building sites, French financial aid and so on. The film commentator goes on explaining that the French presence has nearly destroyed Kanak culture and customs until 1975 when the French government decided to invest 20 million Pacific francs to promote the local culture in Caledonia. Naturally, the French government granted funds to the organization of *Melanesia 2000*, because it was part of the new policy to give some kind of support to a cultural renaissance. One of the two filmmakers, Georges Ravat, was interviewed twenty years later; he explained that important political events had already occurred before *Melanesia 2000* that may account for the very idea of organizing

such a festival. Among those events is the article written in the quality newspaper *Le Monde* on June 7th, 1974 by Yan Celene Uregey in which he asked to hold a referendum on self-government in New Caledonia. In June 1975, several representatives of political parties had signed a declaration calling for independence among them Rock Pidjot, the elected representative of New Caledonia at the French National Assembly, several members of the territorial Congress and its Speaker (who was Uregey), as well as members of pro-independence parties. J.M. Tjibaou believed that the festival was to be the opportunity for the Melanesians to take stock of their cultural heritage that would come in full view for the first time. The festival, he said, was the occasion for them to recover their dignity and their identity. *Melanesia 2000* was the occasion for the Melanesians to claim their rights to express themselves in their own culture.

However, some elders were reluctant to disclose some rituals and customs to the general public. They had to be convinced of the necessity to make Kanak culture visible. The majority of them eventually gave in. Paradoxically, the concept of a Melanesian festival that would reveal some of the Kanak traditions were strongly opposed by left wing groups formed by young people who had participated to the events of May 1968 in France.



*Figure 2. Scene from a Melanesia 2000 performance.*

Two groups had prominent personalities who are still very active nowadays, Foulard Rouges and 1878, (named after the year when Chief Atai rebelled against the French authorities). One of the Kanak activists who were against the festival, Elie Poigoune, now the President of the League of Human Rights, explained on television that customs and rites were sacred and could not be disclosed outside the community. Fote Trolue, a Kanak judge, thought that Kanak cultural claims could not be separated from political ones. Twenty years later, he explained that, being a student in France, he had the feeling that the festival was a kind of treachery and that there would be little benefit to be drawn for the Kanak community. On the whole, Kanak students in France were very suspicious about the fact that the French government financially backed the festival and they were convinced that French officials manipulated the Melanesian organizers. According to Fote Trolue, the weak point of the whole concept of the festival was that political claims were totally obliterated and the proof was that after the festival, the Melanesian community had great expectations that were not defended, neither met by the new left wing government led by French President François Mitterrand. Thus, disillusioned Kanak activists decided to boycott the territorial assembly elections in 1984. Roadblocks were set up and New Caledonia experienced serious unrest in 1984 and was on the verge of civil war, the Caledonians of European origin on one side, and on the other, the pro-independent parties gathered under the banner of the FNLKS group. In June 1988, the Matignon Accord brought back some peace. It was signed by J. Lafleur, the leader of RPCR, by the representatives of the French State, and by J.M. Tjibaou.

Twenty years later, J.M. Tjibaou's widow tried to explain the need they felt for a festival.

At that period, we felt we had to show our culture, that's all. We had to show that we were different, that we existed and that our culture was like that (*Mwa Vee*, issue number 10 September 1995, page 20).

She explained that it took a year to rehearse songs and dances and get ready by setting up small festivals in the different cultural areas of the mainland and the Loyalty Islands. They were eight mini festivals altogether between February and May 1975. The site of the festival was divided into nine cultural areas, called *points Soleil*, where the different delegations were invited to build their huts. They were Kone, Houailou, Canala, South, Mare, Lifou, Ouvea, Tiga, and North.

The first and fifth days were devoted to the official opening and closing of the festival, the second day was kept for the sale of traditional handicrafts on the nine areas. The third day was scheduled for traditional games and activities such as the throwing of javelins, archery, basketwork,

weaving and the preparation of *bougna*, which is the traditional meal cooked in the Kanak oven filled with red-hot stones.

There were two night performances of the play *Kanake*. The first tableau of the play represented the elaborate Kanak rituals of the colonial period or at least the rites as believed they were. The two authors explained that they had to conduct research about them because being transmitted from generation to generation through speeches and gestures, they were partly forgotten. They found useful literature such as Maurice Reinhardt's ethnological notes that proved very insightful and some French texts dealing with the subject that had to be scientifically assessed. Douï Matayo was one of the very few Kanak specialists that could check the authenticity of the French written descriptions of ancient rites and be able to compare them with his traditional knowledge.

The second tableau staged the occupation of New Caledonia by French troops and the bad treatment of the Kanak population forced to hard labour. This part of *Kanake* was soon regarded as a kind of psychological liberation that operated on a large audience. Indeed, the very fact of representing colonialism was the first attempt to expose the suppressed, a heavy component of the collective psyche as the historian Barbançon dwelt upon it in his milestone work *Le pays du non dit (The Country of the Repressed)*. Indeed, the festival and the play *Kanake* worked as a kind of collective exorcism, and as the starting point of a cultural and political arousal of the Melanesian population. Tjibaou, the charismatic leader of the festival, started a political career some time afterwards. A Kanak activist murdered him in 1989. He is now remembered as a political leader who showed a special interest in his culture. To me, he is also a forerunner of modern contemporary drama in New Caledonia.

Another cultural event that is worth dealing with is the exhibition about the Japanese community that took place in 2006 because it also brought about a collective awareness but of a different kind, though, from that of the festival *Melanesia 2000*. In 2006, the ADCK (Tjibaou Centre) organised a special exhibition about the history of the Japanese community in New Caledonia. To my knowledge, this was the first cultural event that officially disclosed the ill treatment experienced by the Japanese community during the Second World War. In addition to the historical exhibition of documents and objects, revealing the evolution of the everyday life of the Japanese in New Caledonia, a short play called *L'arrestation du Japonais* (translated into English: *The Arrest of the Japanese Man*), written by Ishmet Kurtovitch was performed at the center. The subject was a direct indictment of the local authorities that took advantage of the war to arrest Japanese immigrants, confiscate their wealth and deport them to Australia. According to the cultural center, the spectators of the play were from all sorts of ethnic origins and walks of life and their reactions were positive.

A few years ago, in 2001, Kurtovitch's young brother, Nicolas, wrote with Kanak playwright, Pierre Gope, *Les dieux sont borgnes*. Pierre Gope wanted to write a play about powers, Nicolas Kurtovitch would rather write a play about the death of Captain Cook. The result is a play about Captain Cook but also about chiefs, kings, and New Caledonian ambitious politicians that take themselves for Gods, thus the title of the play (which was translated into English *Gods are one-eyed*). Of course, all the anachronisms, historical mistakes and allusions included in the play are meant to build up a farce whose general purpose is to bring New Caledonian spectators to a new awareness, once they realise they do not watch an historical play but rather a theatrical metaphor that assesses contemporary New Caledonia. The murder of Captain Cook is reconsidered according to a new angle and modified according to the Caledonian context. The play was first performed in France in 2002 and was well received. According to the play, the King of Hawai'i received his power and gifts from the God Lono every year. The fact that Captain Cook came back was regarded as a threat by the Hawaiian King who could be asked to give back the power he received from Lono; he could also be asked to return the goods and gifts Captain Cook, who had impersonated Lono, had given. From a political point of view, Lono came back at a very untimely period for the Hawaiian king. Historians know that Cook's stay in Hawai'i was eventually felt as a heavy constraint and Hawaiians were pleased to see him off as provisions had started to be lacking. However, what is foregrounded in the play is not the burden to entertain the god but rather the threat of usurpation. Finally, the play insisted that Cook did not have the calibre of a God-like character and that he accepted a role and a function that were above his condition and were fatal to him.

The dramatic interpretation of this historical fact as done in *The Gods are one-eyed* is in keeping with Said's theory. With *The Arrest of the Japanese Man* and *The Gods are one-eyed*, public opinion has grown richer in historical information and new perspectives regarding local policy making.

In conclusion not only do ideas and theories travel but, depending on the place, they evolve according to the social and cultural circumstances. Thus, any society constantly reassesses its values and maybe tries to correct its defects. It is true that *Melanesia 2000* saved some aspects of Kanak culture from oblivion but it also changed the direction of the socio-political pendulum, since ethnologists date back the Kanak renaissance from this festival. It is also true that Pierre Gope, Nicolas and Ishmet Kurtovitch have recently tried to entertain as well as inform the public at large in New Caledonia through their drama.

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