

New Caledonia and/or Kanaky: On the way to political independence?

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Abstract: The French overseas territory of New Caledonia, called “Kanaky” by the indigenous Kanak people who represent around 40% of the total population, is preparing a referendum to be held on the question of political independence from France. The context is the Noumea Accord of 1998, which provides not only the transfer of political competences from France to New Caledonia (except defence, foreign affairs, law and order, currency and justice), but stipulated that a referendum on independence should be held between 2014 and 2018. This article discusses questions of belonging and identity raised by the possibility of eventual sovereignty. After a historical review of struggles for independence, we offer four different scenarios for the future of the country and some observations on its future prospects.

Keywords: Political independence, New Caledonia, Kanak people, Kanaky

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In 2012, the former French Minister for Overseas Territories, Victorin Lurel, declared that government members are interested in the future of New Caledonia, of “Kanaky”. “We say New Caledonia but it’s connoted. I say so to respect all parties. (...) I think there is enough wisdom in New Caledonia-Kanaky to understand”, explained the minister (Libération 2012). The declaration led to a political debate about the name of the country and its political connotation.

The term “Kanak” refers to the indigenous people of New Caledonia, all of whom are Melanesian, who speak 28 different languages and who are located throughout the archipelago, but predominantly in the Northern Province and the Loyalty Islands Province. Up until today, French people use the term “Melanesian” to refer to the indigenous people of New Caledonia. It was only by 1983 that the French specifically recognised the “Kanak people”, formalised in the Noumea Accord in 1998: “The colonisation has undermined the dignity of the Kanak peoples and deprived them of their identity. (...) It is appropriate to recall these difficult times, to recognise the mistakes, and to restore the Kanak people’s confiscated identity (...)” (Faberon and Postic 2004) The term ‘Kanak’ is nowadays deeply related to the independence movement that does not call the country “New Caledonia”, but “Kanaky” (Néaoutyine 2006). So, Kanaky is the name favoured by pro-independence groups, but not accepted by loyalist parties and the French government.

The Noumea Accord in 1998 provides for discussion and agreement on new identity signs, and the name of the country is part of it. “Kanaky” or “New Caledonia” refers to the identity of the country and its inhabitants. The Accord also concedes to a referendum on political independence from France.

The article discusses questions of belonging and identity with regard to eventual sovereignty and the political future of “Kanaky-New Caledonia”.

Method and theoretical framework

The paper is based on newspaper and scientific articles review, and on ethnographic fieldwork that the authors conducted in New Caledonia between 2007 and 2016. Participatory observation was used to emphasise the results from informal interviews with customary representatives and political authorities.

The article relies on a theoretical framework of identity research by Mee and Wright, Hall and other authors working on belonging and identity. After discussing works on belonging, identity and indigeneity, we present a short history of independence struggles in New Caledonia before analysing the Noumea Accord in 1998 that represents a political turn in the emancipation of the country. To conclude, the paper introduces four scenarios, according to Courtial and Mélin-Soucramanien (2014), that can occur after the independence referendum organised at the latest in 2018.

Belonging and identity

There is a growth of recent research in geography, which draws on belonging as a key concept. Mee and Wright (2009:777) note: “The geographies of belonging are negotiated geographies”. The concept of belonging can appear in different geographical works, such as citizenship, place, identity or indigeneity.

According to Desforges et al (2005:440), research on citizenship has mobilised the concept of belonging: “(h)istorically citizenship was a mark of belonging and commitment to a specific space and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship were performed in this civic context”.

Other works explore contested spaces of national belonging; these literature tensions between what Fenster (2005) calls a “sense of belonging”, everyday practices of belonging, and formal structures of belonging, including in some cases citizenship rights (cited in Mee and Wright 2009:773). In the perspective of an upcoming referendum on political independence in New Caledonia, we assist in an actual political debate on who has citizenship rights, who has the right to vote in the referendum on independence and who “belongs” to the New Caledonian territory.

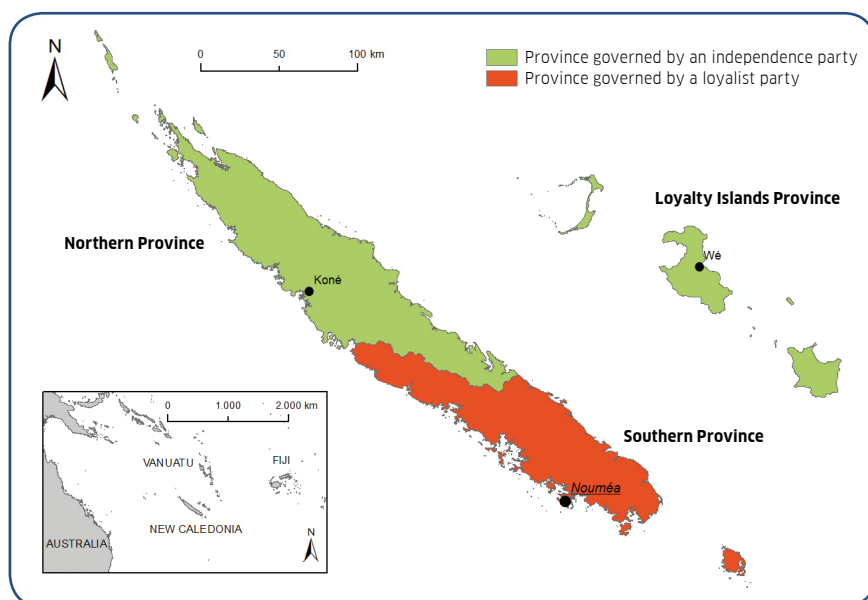


Figure 1: Map of New Caledonia and voting behaviour

The Kanak independence movement refers to the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, adopted by General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960. The Declaration says that “all peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (United Nations, 1960). Graff (2012) explains that in the early 2000s, representatives of Kanak NGOs participated regularly at UN meetings on the rights of indigenous peoples. Those were mainly representatives of the CNDPA (National council for indigenous rights), and then, subsequently, the Rheebe Nuu Committee and the Customary Senate. In 2001, 2005 and 2008, Rock Wamytan, member of FLNKS, and Julien Boanemoui, at the time member of the customary senate, gave a speech at the Special Political and Decolonisation Committee of the UN General Assembly.

In addition to the right or self-determination, the UN (2008:6) proclaim in article 9 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples a “right of belonging”: “Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an indigenous community or nation, in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned. No discrimination of any kind may arise from the exercise of such a right.”

Referring to the politics of indi-

geneity, Muller et al. (2009) show how indigenous landowners and land managers (re)create belonging based on diverse and relational ontologies in Northern Australia. This also applies in New Caledonia where indigenous communities create and negotiate “spaces of belonging” (sacred places) on the basis of relational ontologies. Stuart Hall (1990:226) explains that cultural identities are “points of identification [...] which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position”. In the case of Melanesian countries, the social identity of people is written in space, because identity is formed through the clan’s itinerary. In New Caledonia, an itinerary is represented by a series of sacred places where a group moved throughout its history. These places all have a name in one of the 28 Kanak languages and shape the social identity of each clan. Land legitimacy follows from these sacred sites. So, identity is always constructed and never given (Kowasch 2012; Kowasch, Batterbury and Neumann 2015).

Schein (2009) demonstrates how political struggles over citizenship, race and nation are bound up with landownership and the memorialisation of the past (cited in Mee and Wright 2009:776). We can observe similar struggles in the colonial history and the actual debate on political independence of New Caledonia. The indigenous Kanak people were discriminated against for long time,

Design: Matthias Kowasch 2016.

	Congress (54 members)	Government (11 members)
Pro-independence parties		
FLNKS-UC et Nationalistes	15	3
UNI-PALIKA	9	2
LKS	1	0
Loyalist parties		
Les Républicains / FPU-Rassemblement-UMP	10	2
Calédonie Ensemble	16	3
MRC	1	0
UCF	2	1
		(UCF-MRC-MPC)

Table 1: Composition of the New Caledonian Congress and government since 1 April 2015 (election 31 December 2014).

and this discrimination continues today, in instances such as renting apartments or nightclub entries. On the other hand, extremist Kanaks see the future of the country as a racial inclusion-exclusion base. Inclusion-exclusion arguments refer to the concept of identity that Tajfel (1981) defines as a “part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from [his] knowledge of [his] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (cited in Fisher 2014a:2), and which others have seen as closely linked with culture (Nagel 1994).

The key question that we ask is how these questions of belonging and identity influence the upcoming referendum and in general the political future of New Caledonia. Before

discussing the referendum that will be organised until 2018, we shall first present the origin of independence struggles in this French overseas territory.

Origin of independence struggles in New Caledonia

The nickel sector, the core industry of New Caledonia, was booming in the late 1960s. Fortunes were built in a few months; production forecasts based on nickel prices on the world market gave the feeling that anything was possible (Kowasch 2010). A flow of immigrants arrived in the country: more than 8,000 French citizens came to live in New Caledonia between 1969 and 1972. In addition, a few thousand immigrants arrived from other French overseas territories in the Pacific, Wallis and Futuna. We

have to note that in 1969 there were ‘only’ 7,800 people born in France living in New Caledonia (Doumenge 1982:227), while the total population of the country was 100,579 (ITSEE 2000:77).

However, the economic boom leads to a decline in the political autonomy of the country. Reducing the autonomy was carried out by the statutory reform of 1963, which increased the powers of the State, and the “Billotte laws” in 1969. The latter laws transferred the administration of the New Caledonian districts back to the French State and also dealt with mining regulations; nickel, chromium and cobalt became “economically strategic resources”. Hence, the allocation of mining licenses was reserved to the State. On 18 July 1972, Prime Minister Pierre Messmer explained to the Secretary of State for Overseas Territories, Xavier Deniau, how the central government intends to achieve its aims: “The French presence in New Caledonia can not be threatened (...) by a nationalist claim of indigenous peoples (...). In the short and medium term, immigration from France and from French overseas departments should avoid this danger by maintaining and improving the numerical ratio of communities. In the long term, indigenous nationalist claim will only be avoided if the non-originating Pacific communities represent a majority population mass.” (Vivier, 2009:21)

At the beginning of the 1970s, the price for nickel on the world market dropped and resulted in an ‘economic crisis’ in New Caledonia. The reduction of political autonomy and the crisis led to a change in the political landscape: In June 1975, Kanak delegates and organisations met in the village of La Conception and elaborate a statement for Kanak independence. They formed a coordination committee for Kanak independence (Leblic, 2003).

In 1984, a new political status (“Lemoine statute”) for New Caledonia was voted by the national Parliament. The Lemoine statute provided a five-year transition period for a referendum on political independence in 1989, but did not limit the right of suffrage. The new proposal did not comply with the declaration of the round-table in Nainville-les-Roches (8-12 July 1983), that not only recognised the right of self-determination to the indi-



Source: Toussaint.

Figure 2: International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, Gatope (Northern Province of New Caledonia), 9 August 2009.

genous Kanak people, but also legitimacy to the other ethnic communities (Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ière 2013). Thus, the independence movement hardened its attitude and reorganised in August 1984 in a Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), which boycotted the elections in November 1984. The Lemoine statute reflects a political debate based on two principles. The first is the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, the second is equality, which means that all citizens are equal before the law and have the right to vote. France and the European Union are imbued with this second principle, while the United Nations, which host the majority of formerly colonised countries, are more sensitive to the first one.

The period 1984-88 is characterised by violent struggles between the independence proponents and opponents. The tragic climax was the hostage-taking on Ouvéa island where 19 Kanak activists and two members of the hostage recovery team were killed. It appeared that 12 of the Kanak activists had been executed and the leader of the hostage-takers had been left without medical care, and died some hours later.

After the Ouvéa tragedy, the Matignon Accords were signed on 26 June 1988. The primary achievement of the Matignon treaty was to put a stop on the violent and insurrectional situation in the country (Lindenmann 2016). The agreements also served to suspend the raising of the issue on self-determination for a 10 year-period, to accelerate economic development in the frame of a spatial rebalancing policy between the North and the South and a political restructuring of the country in three provinces (Nord, South and Loyalty Islands), two of which are governed by the independence movement (Fig. 1).

Approaching 1998, instead of proceeding to the promised referendum, political authorities started to negotiate a new treaty, fearing violent struggles, because the country was still divided in pro- and anti-independence movements.

Political turn with the Noumea Accord

The Noumea Accord, signed on 5 May 1998 by the independence movement FLNKS, the loyalist party RPCR (Rally for Caledonia in the Repub-

lic) and the French state, established legal reorganisation. For the first time, the New Caledonian parliament, the Congress, could enact legislation. All political competences should be transferred to New Caledonia except sovereign powers (defence, foreign affairs, law and order, currency and justice). The transfer of the new responsibilities is irreversible (Pontier 2000).

The transfer of political competences represents an important power sharing that is also visible in the government formation. Indeed, government seats are shared in proportion to the seats of the parliamentary groups (Lindenmann 2016). All eligible political parties that have a parliament group are thus represented in the government. Political parties have to surpass a limit of 5% of votes to be represented in the Congress (Garde

2001, Lindenmann 2016). If they gain 5 seats or more in the Congress, they can form a group and claim a seat in the government. The congress includes 54 members, seven are sent by the Loyalty Islands Province parliament, 15 by the Northern Province parliament and 32 by the Southern Province parliament. The Congress elects the New Caledonian government. Since April 2015, the government is composed of 5 members of pro-independence parties and six members of loyalist parties (Table 1).

The government reflects a gap within the Caledonian society, even if this rift is complex. The loyalists of FPU-Rassemblement-UMP and the pro-independence party FLNKS-UC ("Union Calédonienne") for example agreed in 2010 to the temporary representation of the country by two official flags: the French "tricolore" and the



Figure 3: Fisherman with Kanak flag on his shirt

Source: Kowasch.



Figure 4: FLNKS meeting in Noumea, March 2016

Kanaky-flag. Former French Prime Minister François Fillon, when visiting New Caledonia in 2010, assisted to the hoisting of the Kanaky-flag in front of the office of the French High Commissioner in Noumea (Mrgudovic 2011).

The flag is one of the identity signs that have to be redefined according to the Nouméa Accord. Thus, the Accord provides new symbolic ‘markers’ comprising a flag, a country name, banknotes, a slogan and an anthem. While banknotes are being printed, a slogan created and a hymn written, political authorities did not decide about a new flag and a new name for the country. While French Polynesia, Wallis & Futuna and other French overseas territories have their own flags, it is still not the case for New Caledonia. Discussions are controversial and differences over the flag were so intense that they led to the moribundity of the government for much of 2010 (Fisher 2014a:9). One reason why it is so difficult to agree on identity markers is the lack of a ‘national’ identity (Lindenmann 2016). The Noumea Accord indeed creates a New Caledonian citizenship, but its definition is still incomplete. The notion of citizenship is based on the right to vote at provincial elections. But only the Kanaks define themselves as a “nation” with its own cultural identity (see Fig. 3). At the same time, symbolic ‘markers’ mean nothing if the community does not really exist by itself. The essence is the feeling of belonging to the same community

(Fisher 2014a). The feeling of belonging refers to the definition of the concept of belonging given by Desforges et al (2005): that citizenship was a mark of belonging and commitment to a specific space (see chapter “Belonging and identity”).

The Noumea Accord also contributes to the recognition of cultural identity of the indigenous Kanak people by establishing a customary senate. The senate, created on the base of linguistic spheres, must be consulted on all decisions with regard to the Kanak identity (Garde 2001), so that it enjoys some of the privileges of a second chamber of parliament. Nevertheless, some of the members complain that the senate, whose members are only men, has no power in decision-making and is thus unable to enact laws.

In addition, the Accord foreshadows a referendum on the question whether to create a sovereign state. Article 2.2.1 of the Noumea Accord defines the electorate for the referendum that has to be organised between 2014 and 2018 “as including those with 20-years residence to the referendum date no later than 31 December 2014; those eligible to vote in 1998; those having customary civil status or, if born in New Caledonia, having New Caledonia as the centre of their material and moral interests or having one parent born there with such material and moral interests; voting age persons born before 1 January 1989 who lived in New Caledonia from 1988 to 1998; and those born after 1 January 1989 having one parent who

could vote in 1998” (Fisher 2013:100). Concomitant to this electorate that is based on the ‘fixed’ electorate for the provincial elections, there is a debate between jurists defending the principle of equality (everybody has the same right to participate in elections) and jurists defending the right of indigenous people to self-determination.

Further political and socio-economic disparities

Before getting to the referendum about political independence, the transfer of political competences represents an important power sharing that political scientists call “shared sovereignty”. From an international viewpoint, the country is not sovereign, but from a French perspective, New Caledonia is a territorial entity with a unique status of emancipation. In the past years, France has encouraged and facilitated the country’s way to further emancipation, even if French government representatives reiterate that New Caledonia is still a part of France.

The French State is the largest contributor to New Caledonia’s budget, contributing A\$2 billion in 2007 (US\$1,52 billion), about a sixth of its GDP (Fisher 2013:125). According to the MRC (Republican Caledonian Movement), the French State still contributes US\$1,37 billion (around 16%) to the GDP that increased to US\$8,36 billion in 2013 (Actu.nc, 2016:7). The MRC argues that in case of independence, the salaries should be devaluated by 40% in general or one of four civil servants must be released. The pro-independence party FLNKS-UC replies that US\$1,16 billion flow back from New Caledonia to France each year, in terms of expatriate savings, repatriated bank earnings and other benefits (Actu.nc, 2016:7). Moreover, the expenses for the political competences that will be transferred to New Caledonia (defence, foreign affairs, law and order, currency and justice) can be reduced. Fig. 4 and 5 show a FLNKS meeting being held in March 2016 under the caption “Serenity and confidence to win in 2018”.

Nevertheless, the financial question is only one issue in the scenario of a “yes” vote at the upcoming referendum on political independence. Growing social disparities, marginalisation of a part of the population,

especially young people, and education are relevant problems that the New Caledonian government has to tackle.

In 2011, the economist Samuel Gorohouna (2011) touched a sore point by analysing ethnic inequalities. He shows that non-Kanaks have more permanent and better paid employment than Kanaks. Gorohouna explains that non-Kanaks are better integrated in the business community, while on the other hand, there is discrimination against Kanaks. He concludes that New Caledonia still has a long way to go in order to achieve a “common destiny”.

Imbalances are still rampant, and disparities do not only exist between different ethnic communities, because are also visible in space. In 2014, around 67% of the total population live in “Greater Noumea”, which includes the capital Noumea and the three neighbouring districts Mont-Dore, Dumbea and Païta (ISEE 2015). Spatial disparities are also visible in two different land tenure systems: common and customary land. In contrast to common land, customary land is inalienable, indefeasible and elusive (Kowasch and Batterbury, forthcoming). That is why in the past, most of economic projects were realised on common and not on customary land. Private companies could not speculate on land. Some 26% of New Caledonia is classified customary land, and 50% is located in the Northern Province (<http://www.adraf.nc>).

Four scenarios

Actual political authorities do not seem to have a common vision and all answers, when it comes to a social model for the future of an independent country. Which immigration policy will apply when France is no longer present? Which educational system should be adopted; should the same be followed like in France? How the social system can guarantee care for everyone? How can unemployment assistance be developed? There are many questions that are still unresolved. And the Congress still lacks a debate around the design of a constitution for a future sovereign state.

In the face of a lacking debate on a future constitution and a social model, the report of the French parliamentary commission delegated to New



Figure 5: FLNKS meeting in Noumea, March 2016

Source: TINGAL.

Caledonia evokes four scenarios that can occur after the referendum to be organised, probably in 2018 (Courtial and Mélin-Soucramanien 2014; Fisher 2014b; Lindenmann 2016).

The first scenario will be the classical independence, which means that New Caledonians would lose French citizenship and access to the French educational system. Financial transfers would be stopped and the country would have to establish its own police corps. The second scenario provides a ‘partnership’ that can be explained by the notion of “independence-association”. New Caledonia will become a sovereign state, but surrenders certain competences to France, such as foreign affairs and defence. The country can join the United Nations as an independent state. The political status of the Cook Islands is often cited as example in this case (Courtial and Mélin-Soucramanien 2014, Lindenmann 2016). An extended autonomy represents a third scenario. A majority of political competences will be transferred to New Caledonia, but sovereign powers remain mainly with France (Courtial and Soucramanien 2014). Financial transfers from France to New Caledonia will be pursued, but this scenario will certainly not appease the aspiration towards an independence movement. The fourth scenario provides a continued autonomy, which means to maintain the status quo. The main problem of this solution is that several arrangements of the Noumea Accord were established to further the emancipation process of the coun-

try. French immigrants arrived after 1998 are excluded from voting rights in local affairs and New Caledonian citizenship. It does not seem conceivable that French immigrants remain excluded, but admitting them would marginalise the independence vote in case of a second or third referendum. Voter eligibility, concerning longstanding and new residents, is still a sensitive issue (Fisher 2014b).

Conclusion and prospects

A spin-off of New Caledonia can have impacts on the region and the emancipation process in other countries like French Polynesia or Bougainville. Therefore, the question of political independence and which of the four scenarios will occur remains unclear. While some politicians defend an extended autonomy, others believe in political independence. For the latter, only the creation of a sovereign state completes the process of decolonisation. If a compromise like an “independence-association” propitiates the different interests is unsure at present.

In resume, the long process of decolonisation of the country is still fragmentary and ongoing. To accompany New Caledonia in successfully achieving decolonisation remains a challenge for France. The knowledge about New Caledonia in France is weak, but the French government claims a special security role on the international stage, and its presence in the South Pacific bolsters this role and provides France with large EEZ status, an access to significant mine-

ral resources and a foothold in the growing Asia-Pacific market (Fisher 2015). On the other hand, the Melanesian neighbours of New Caledonia support the Kanak struggle for independence.

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