Figure 1: The Kanak flag & the tricolour fly side by side at the Pacific Games in Nouméa 2011

Source: Peter Lindenmann, 2011.

The blood-stained flags of liberty
The struggle for adequate signs of national identity in New Caledonia

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Abstract: The Nouméa treaty of 1998 that created the framework for the transition of New Caledonia from a French overseas territory towards emancipation provided also for the creation of new identity markers. Lacking a shared understanding of history and a common vision for the future, the process of adopting a flag was blocked for more than ten years. As an intermediate solution the flag of the Kanak independence movement is hoisted side by side to the French tricolour since 2010. While some loyalist parties continue to campaign for a common flag, pro-independence parties are waiting to descend the tricolour, and others would favor the status quo. The unresolved question of the right symbol is also a reflection of the uncertain political future as the referendum on independence looms.

"As president of the provisional government of Kanaky I salute to the national emblem and I declare constituted the provisional government of the Republic of Kanaky. Long live Kanaky!" (Jean-Marie Tjibaou, 1/12/1984)

When I came to New Caledonia in 2004 to conduct fieldwork in the frame of my thesis project, four flagpoles were standing in front of the seat of the New Caledonian government behind the Port Moselle marina. But only three flags where flying in the Pacific breeze. Two similar ones, both joining a *"fleche faitière"*, the traditional rooftop sign of Kanak chiefs, with the outline of territorial boundaries represented the Northern and the Island provinces, which were both ruled by pro-independence Kanak nationalists. The flag of the Southern Province, a loyalist fief, differs. It depicts a sailboat surfing on a wave with the sail in the colors of the French tricolour. The fourth flagpole was standing empty at that time. It had been erected to display the future flag of New Caledonia that the Nouméa treaty of 1998 provided for. The Nouméa treaty (*"Accord de Nouméa"*) was signed in 1998 between the supporters of independence, the loyalists and the French state. The treaty regulates the ongoing period of transition between the former status of New Caledonia as a French overseas territory and the future status of New Caledonia.

Unlike other Pacific territories, New Caledonia had been a settler colony. People who are descendants from immigrants or are immigrants themselves make up the majority of the population today. The original inhabitants, the Kanaks, became a minority in their own country, lost their best lands, were only accepted as (French) citizens after almost a hundred years of colonization, remained economically and politically marginalized for a long time and still do not have an equal shares of the current prosperity. Immigration from other French Pacific territories led to large communities of Wallisians, Futunians, Tahitians and Ni-Vanuatu competing for the same unqualified jobs, cheap housing and social welfare. The "white" settler community is also not uniform. Some are descendants from convicts deported from France in the 19th century or from rebels against French colonial rule in North Africa, others have their origin as free settlers, military personnel, miners or came as teachers and bureaucrats in more recent times. New Caledonians do not share a common history but have different interpretations of the past. This has been a major obstacle in the search for common signs of identity during the recent period of emancipation. The issue of (national) identity is furthermore closely connected to the looming referendum on independence that will be held in the period between 2014 and 2018. Lacking an agreement on common symbols means also the absence of a shared vision for the political future of this South Pacific archipelago. The following article draws on regular fieldwork in New Caledonia between 2004 and 2011 to depict the most recent episode of the struggle for a flag in the country, to situate it in history and theory, and to show its implication in the political situation.

Colonization and the struggle for independence

New Caledonia has been under French sovereignty since the 24th September 1853, and became an overseas territory in the aftermath of WWII. Only then the indigenous Kanak people were recognized as French citizens. But only in 1957 all Kanak were allowed to vote (Leblic 2003). New Caledonia had a local elective body since 1885, which competences were expanded over the years. The *Loi cadre*, introduced in 1956 in all French overseas territories, established a local government that had large competences, such as health, primary and secondary schooling and mining. But under President De Gaulle many of these competences were taken back by the French government (Devaux 1997). Even the local municipalities where transformed into French communes putting them in charge of the French Ministry of the Interior.

This colonial backlash accompanied by an immigration wave led to political radicalization. Between 1968 and 1980 when many other Pacific overseas territories gained their independence, the autonomist party UC (*Caledonian Union*) was joined to the left by several parties favoring independence for New Caledonia (Mohammed-Gaillard 2003). In 1977 the UC changed its leadership and declared itself in favor of independence. On the other side, the loyalist mining tycoon Jacques Lafleur also formed his RPCR (*Rally for Caledonia in the Republic*) in 1977 (Leblic 2003). In 1978, the pro-independence parties joined forces and established the FI (*Independence Front*). The struggle then turned violent, and a series of incidents brought New Caledonia to the brink of civil war. In 1983 a first peace agreement failed and in between the proclamation of a new statutory law and the territorial elections of November 1984, the FI was transformed into the more radical FLNKS (*Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front*). In this time the *"drapeau Kanaky"* as the future flag of the independent state of Kanaky was created. It became a potent symbol for the struggle for independence and was hoisted during the following violent events as an antithesis to the French tricolour. In 1988 a first political agreement (*"Accord de Matignon"*) brought peace to the streets and delayed the consultation on the question of independence for 10 ye-

ars, a period earmarked for more economic development (Mohamed-Gaillard 2003). By decentralizing political competences to three provinces, two of them ruled by pro-independence parties, activists got jobs and converted into bureaucrats. In the Northern Province, the Kanak flag was hoisted beside the tricolour in front of public buildings on a regular basis. When the vote on independence approached, after a decade, a new treaty was signed by the dominant blocs, the FLNKS and the RPCR after the ten years delay: the *"Accord de Nouméa"*. Instead of a referendum producing only losers, the new treaty again postponed the question of independence and provided the possibility to create common identity symbols for New Caledonia, a territory now characterized by shared sovereignty and on its way to emancipation (Kowasch and Lindenmann 2014).

The right flag for New Caledonia

Today, the question of the appropriate flag to represent New Caledonia is still a hot topic. The Nouméa treaty of 1998 provided for the definition of new markers of identity: a flag, the name of the country, an anthem, specially designed banknotes, and a slogan. Even though Tahiti, also under French sovereignty, has had its own flag for more than thirty years, in New Caledonia there seemed to be no space for political symbols between the French tricolour that loyalists still reclaim as theirs, and the *drapeau Kanaky* that the pro-independence umbrella party FLNKS had chosen to represent the future Kanak republic. Political symbols are part of rituals, within the manipulation of political myths they may serve to create continuity and perpetuate the status quo or to attack and topple it. Rituals also create legitimacy. Such rituals furthermore also create legitimacy (Kertzer 1992). The use of political symbols in rituals such as the hoisting of a flag is an important feature of national identity. For Jurt (1998: 37) citing Erikson (1966) identity is realized when persons can match the structures of their own experiences with their personal perception and social role. National identity is always connected to the past, to history, tradition and origin in order to legitimize the social norms of the present. The construction of a common past is

thus of a tremendous importance for the constitution of a modern nation. In that sense each form of social organization that is reproduced via institutions, such as a state, is founded on the myth that individual lives are lived as part of a collective history (Jurt 1998). But this can only work if the different groups within a society can agree on such a collective history and this is, as the French philosopher Ernest Renan formulated it in 1882, voted for in everyday life (http://www.bmlisieux.com/archives/nation04.htm, accessed: 4/6/2014). As a political anthropologist, I'm interested in signs and symbols that convey identity within the public sphere. Why are they established, why do some disappear, while others seem to remain eternally. Why do identity markers lead to disputes, or are destroyed, stolen or disfigured? What meaning do they convey? How is identity created out of political symbols, and how do signs of identity become political objects? I primarily study visible, presented symbols, and how they structure a space and create a tissue of political allegiance, historical preferences, and an administrative order. The evolution of the quest for the right flag in New Caledonia provides an interesting example for discussing these questions. Soon after the conclusion of the Nouméa treaty, the website atlasgeo.net hosted a page that collected designs for a future common flag. During the 2004 provincial elections the party *"Calédonie mon pays"* campaigned with a flyer showing different possible designs for new flags (see signes-identitaires-nc.com). In 2007 a committee was appointed by Déwé Gorodey, the responsible minister within the New Caledonian government to search for identity markers (Maclellan 2010). The committee decided to concentrate on the less controversial slogan, anthem and design of bank notes and to postpone the search for a flag and the name of the country. Despite the Nouméa treaty giving a clear mission to search for common symbols and noting that a few efforts had been undertaken (article 1.5), the flagpole for the national flag was still empty ten years after the signing of the treaty. There are some symbols that stand for the whole country. One is the Cagou, an endemic flightless bird. It is used by the postal service for example. The New Caledonian soccer team has worn a red and silver kit

(the color of the Cagou) for many years. The government of New Caledonia uses a design comprising a nautilus shell, a *flèche faitière* (rooftop sign), and a Cook pine (*Araucaria columnaris*) colored in light blue, orange and white (a moderated version of the tricolour) as its coat of arms. Monuments, architecture and buildings are also part of the Caledonian symbolism. The Tjibaou Cultural Center (Bensa 2000), built between 1993 and 1998, symbolizes traditional Kanak houses with modern elements and materials. Older administrative buildings convey a colonial style, in classic or more modern form depending on their age. The administrative buildings in the Loyalty Islands Province stand out with their pyramidal roofs. They convey a strong political message as they reproduce the style of a chief's house in modern form. The Southern Province shows little tricolours on the right and left side of entrances to its buildings. New Caledonia has a large number of monuments. The collection ranges from war memorials to statues of former governors. The "Mwâ Kââ"-sculpture (see figure 2) was supposed to serve as a visual symbol for the shared destiny of all New Caledonians, but is at the heart of a large dispute when the ruling majority proceeded along an "out of the eyes, out of memory" argument. Indeed, the sculpture was erected in a peripheral parking lot instead of in the main city square (Mclellan 2005). Another dispute example is theft of the *"Poilu"* (a New Caledonian soldier) from the war monument in Koné, the capital of the Kanak-dominated Northern Province, and its replacement by the carved statue of a Kanak warrior (LNC, 6 May, 2010). The question of the 'right' signs and symbols is important in New Caledonia, given its transitional governance status. As the American political anthropologist David I. Kertzer (1992) demonstrates using the example of the American flag and with reference to Durkheim's work, the 'Nation' is not tangible. It can thus only be represented by symbols such as a flag that becomes a cult symbol. Any threat to the symbol is transformed into an attack on citizen identity. People who disagree with a flag and who don't respect them are thus treated as heretics and not as political dissidents. Revolutionaries and the establishment can both be attached to rituals and symbols

(Kertzer 1992). This may explain the ferocity of the struggle for the 'right' flag for New Caledonia.

New developments

To the surprise of many, the issue of flag came up rapidly again after the 2009 provincial elections. Pierre Frogier, a long-time confident of the loyalist leader Jacques Lafleur, became president of the Southern Province. In the context of a political initiative

he proposed desisting from the quest for a common flag (Chappell 2011). He suggested that the *drapeau Kanaky*, the flag of the pro-independence movement, should fly together with the French tricolour in front of official buildings, at least until the political blockade in the search for a common flag was resolved (Maclellan 2010). The proposition was at first perceived as a mere political ploy by the competing loyalist parties, and the pro-inde-

Figure 2: The Mwâ Kââ sculpture in Nouméa

Source: Arndt Meyer, 2007.

pendence faction perceived the idea as a ruse to assure their compliance. But in June 2010, the proposition was well received by the conservative French Prime Minister François Fillon. He also had in mind the Pacific Games that were scheduled to take place in New Caledonia in 2011. To fly the *drapeau Kanaky* beside the tricolour would avoid the embarrassing situation of receiving the Pacific Island states beneath the French flag, which would have exposed France to an accusation of failing its decolonization process. President Nicolas Sarkozy lent support, and emphasized that the hoisting of the Kanak flag was only a provisional intermediate step in the process. The final aim remained the creation of a common flag that would represent all elements of the New Caledonian population.

One month later, Fillon was expected to visit New Caledonia. His arrival was scheduled for the 19th of July. Just a day earlier, the *Congrès*, the territorial parliament, voted on a proposition to hoist the two flags. The proposition was supported by the *Rassemblement-UMP* (formerly RPCR), the party of Pierre Frogier, as well as by the pro-independence parties. It was opposed by *Calédonie ensemble*, another loyalist party led by Philippe Gomès, then President of the government of New Caledonia (LNC, 14/7/2010). When the Prime Minister arrived the next day, a new flagpole had been erected in the garden of the residence of the French High Commissioner in downtown Nouméa. During the ceremony, Julien Boinemoa, the president of the customary senate presented the *drapeau Kanaky* to the Prime Minister. Boinemoa explained in his speech that the *drapeau Kanaky* would fly as an equal sign of identity beside the French tricolour, and he did not mention the provisional nature of the solution.

Questions remain

After François Fillon hoisted the *drapeau Kanaky*, all public institutions had to decide if and when they would follow the example and raise the Kanak flag on their buildings. Among the New Caledonian population, the flag question was widely discussed, and feelings were divided. Most Kanaks, even those who did not sympathize with the pro-independence front, did agree with the hoisting of the flag. They perceived the official flying as a final and

long awaited recognition of Kanak identity by the French state. The older ones who remembered independence declarations in neighboring Pacific Island states felt that the ceremony had not been correct: *"It's the first time that we have seen a flag raising without another one pulled it down"*. The Kanaks in the Northern Province wondered about the fuss that people in the South made about the Kanak flag. In the North, governed by the PALIKA (Kanak Liberation Party), it's common since a long time that the two flags have flown side by side (Kanak 2010).

Most European descendants, and Tahitians, Wallisians and other opponents of independence could not identify with the Kanak flag, and vehemently opposed it. The arguments turned around the same topics, in the newspapers and on the streets. The flag is not the flag of the Kanaks but of a political movement, it would not represent all Kanaks but only the pro-independence advocates, and the flag is soiled by the blood of the victims during the violent struggles in the 1980s. Those who refused the *drapeau Kanaky* were reminded by others that their beloved tricolour had also seen a fair amount of blood spilled.

The role of Pierre Frogier, the loyalist who had come up with the idea, was also debated. *"His legitimacy depends on it"*, a Kanak colleague told me. The successor of Lafleur would only have a political future if the two historical blocs, the supporters of independence and the loyalists, remained in place and were divided by the fault-line of the independence question. The current situation was dangerous for Frogier, with multiple divisions within both blocs, including autonomist or even nationalist tendencies among some loyalist leaders and cross-cutting alliances. A colleague concluded that Frogier supported the hoisting of the drapeau Kanaky beside the French tricolour because it created a strong symbol to the two blocs, and thus legitimized his pro-independence opponents, as well as himself. She reported that her Kanak friends identified even less with the tricolour than her European friends did with the Kanak flag. *"They don't feel French"*. On the other side, European descendants would feel less and less French and would try to create a new identity for themselves. But, nevertheless, they felt deceived by Frogier.

Political complications

After the residence of the High Commissioner flew the *drapeau Kanaky*, people wondered if all other institutions would follow. According to the newspaper, François Fillon's decision was only valid for the offices of the French central state administration and not for local institutions (LNC, 19 July, 2010:3). The wishes of the local parliament had no judicial value. But after a few days hesitation, the other institutions followed. First the government of New Caledonia, which now flew three flags on its roof, the tricolour, the European Union flag and the Kanak flag. The mayor's office on Ouvéa island declared that they would hoist the tricolour to join the *drapeau Kanaky* for the first time in 30 years (LNC, 28/7/2010). The Southern Province followed a few days later (LNC, 7/8/2010), as did the *"Congrès"*, the local parliament, and finally the municipal buildings in the vicinity of the capital were also adorned with the flag of the independence movement (LNC, 9/8/2010). There remained the Nouméa town hall. Finally Jean Lèques, the mayor of the capital and a loyalist stalwart, had to give in. He agreed to hoist the flag but avoided the ceremony, forcing his deputy, Gael Yanno, to represent him (LNC, 10/8/2010). Yanno has since lost the elections for one of the two New Caledonia seats in the French parliament, and has also lost the vote to succeed Lèques as mayor of Nouméa. After Nouméa, the other municipalities also hoisted the flag, with the exceptions of La Foa, and Bourail. Both municipalities were governed by *Calédonie ensemble*, the loyalist party of Philippe Gomès. The municipal council of Bourail asked Pierre Frogier, then President of the Southern Province, to come to Bourail to explain to the people in this rural town the reason for having two flags (Les Infos, 3/9/2010).

Almost four years later, the situation has changed little. The local parliament reinstalled a commission charged with the search for a common flag at the end of 2012 (LNC, 28/12/2012). Even by late 2012, the chances of its success where estimated as being slim. Its mandate is now passed, with the local elections that were held on the 11th of May 2014. On this date the parliament was elected that will organize the forthcoming referenda on the question of independence.

Conclusion

The question of the right flag is still undecided. For most Kanak the answer is clear, the President of the Northern Province expressed it quite early in the debate: *"I do not want a dirty trick, now that our flag was officially hoisted, we must have the courage to say that this will be the sign of identity and it will not fall"* (Les Infos, 23/7/2010). In other words, the *drapeau Kanaky* is not coming down again. For them, the only question remaining is when the tricolour will finally descend, and be folded to the sound of a marching band, and handed over to the last High Commissioner who will then climb board a ship or a jet and head home, thus following the script written by other independent countries, such as Fiji in 1970, Solomon Islands in 1978, or Vanuatu in 1980.

On the other hand the loyalists are divided, the followers of Philippe Gomès still campaign for a common flag. A proposition combining the coat of arms used by the government with the dark red and silver colors used at sporting competitions and by the local Olympic committee is promoted by them (drapeau.commun.nc). Gomès has tied his political destiny to the question of the flag. He risked and lost his position as New Caledonian President in 2011. But it helped him to secure both of the New Caledonian seats in the French National Assembly for *Calédonie ensemble*, his party in the national elections of 2012. In spring 2014, Sonia Lagarde, his second in command in *Calédonie ensemble*, managed to wrestle the municipality of Nouméa from the competing loyalist parties. The party also did poll well in the recent provincial elections. The divisions within the loyalist camp however run deep.

As each side has constructed the flag to which it adheres as an identity symbol, they threaten their opponents, be it the supporters of the Kanak flag or the tricolour. The ferocity of the fight, theft of flags, downfall of governments, and accusations of all kinds are partly explained by the strength of attachments. What complicates the story it that those who argue with a shared history and a common destiny actually promote two flags flying side by side, while those who promote a common flag are currently furthering the division between settlers and original inhabitants. Supporters of the common flag would not trade in the tricolour and the Kanak flag for the new flag of New Caledonia. They would only be willing to replace the Kanak flag with their new design and keep the tricolour flying as the sign of the sovereign power. That would be unacceptable to the pro-independence parties. New Caledonia is therefore far from an agreement on a common perception of history, from a shared decision on appropriate political symbols, and from a shared vision about a possible way ahead, after this period of transition.

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Figure 3: A variation on the theme of identity on the walls of the Maison commune in Pothé, Bourail

Source: P. Lindenmann, 2011.