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**When ethnography is no more bearable : the very sexism as a reality and a political discourse of kanak men from the slums in Noumea (New-Caledonia)**

**Introduction**

Margaret Jolly, in the introduction of her work entitled "Women of the place - Kastom, colonialism and gender in Vanuatu" (1994), points out the importance of giving one's position, as an individual and an ethnologist, in the ethnographic survey. She writes : "the personal and intellectual history of the ethnographer deserves consideration, not simply like a narcissistic exercise of reflexion, but because the knowledge that is produced depends on the particular historical relation that the ethnographer built with people whom it tries to understand and on which he writes". In this paper, I will try to show how to negotiate the relationship within the survey through extended and repeated fieldworks, when the intellectual and political ideas of the informants becomes antagonistic with those of the ethnologist. I will briefly present the political situation in New Caledonia and a panorama of the gender question in Nouméa, those two questions locating the framework of my fieldwork and the antagonism which increased. Then I will say a word of the emergent political speech from the small independantist groups born in the spontaneous settlements in Nouméa. As a conclusion, I will talk about the lasting of the ethnographic survey when ideology in the informants' discourse is getting more radical.

**Political situation in New Caledonia**

In the middle of the XIXth century, the french project of colonization in New Caledonia planned to make a European settlement of these islands. It was decided to make a colonization of convicts, then, a few decades later, was elaborated a project of farming free colonization. In this context, Kanak people were slowly dispossessed of their arable lands and were summoned to leave and to give up their lands in the benefit of the french settlers. The colonial government, to regulate this despossession, founded quartering and delimited indigenous reserves in- and outside which Kanak could not circulate on their own. Lastly, obnubilated by the fear of an indigenous war, the colonial government worked out a particular legislation to hold Kanak remote of the city. The name of it was "code de l'indigénat", which regulated the circulation and the conditions on which Kanak could stay in Nouméa. This code de l'indigénat was abolished only after the second world war.

Today, approximately 200 000 inhabitants live in New Caledonia. More of half of these people live in what is called "Grand Nouméa" (city and far suburbs). Various groups of populations live there. The main group are the descendants of french settlers, called Calédoniens. The next main group is made of French immigrant arrived in New-Caledonia in the 1970, and next after them come people from France coming for a short term stay (3, 4, 5 years). All of these european people count for the larger part of the inhabitants of the city. Then, there are the Kanak people, of which some live in Nouméa since the end of the "code de l'indigénat", and others who came to settle later on to find a job in the city, and then later on again, others kanaks moved in Nouméa, as temporary residents or settlers, who chose to come from the bush to the capital of the country as a sign of support of the political agreements aiming at the coming independence of the country. Beside european and kanak people, it is also necessary to count a significant population coming from other oceanian islands, like Wallis and Futuna, and even if they are fewer of them, from Vanuatu or Fiji islands. To finish with groups of population living in Noumea, they are the descendants of the Vietnamese labours and of the Javanese that the colonial government had sent in NC for agriculture or for the mines of nickel. The society of New Caledonia, is divided between a upper middle classe made of European people (white) and a lower class made of Kanak people and the other black or non-european groups of the country.

### **Panorama of the gender question in New-Caledonia**

Regarding the relationship between men and women in the country, the situation is characterized by huge lack of balance, set around values and conditions which are different from one group of population to another. For the Kanaks and the Wallisians people, whom I worked with in the spontaneous settlements of Nouméa, prestige, values and personal status of a man or a woman is related, amongst other important matters, to the number of children that he (or she) has. One becomes a real adult only after becoming a mother, or a father, of a child (home made or adopted). Regarding the Kanaks, we know little about the relationship between sexes before the first contacts with Europeans and during colonial times. Brownen Douglas, in her "Across the great divide journey in history & anthropology" (1998), charges this silence of the litterature with a wilful disregard of the kanak informants, who thus reduce the status of the women in their society ; disregard also on behalf of Europeans who collected these accounts, and whom, for a long time, have left aside women's part in social life. The recent work of Christine Solomon documents the topic of relationships between the sexes in the kanak society. She writes that the complementary duality men/women set up all the symbolic order, what is translated, in the reality of the social relationship between the men and the women by the domination of the first over the seconds : the women are excluded from the political power and are assigned to the domestic work which they must achieve with modesty and humility. A group of representations built around the reproductive capacities of the women comes to support the social standard of separation and hierarchy between the women and the men. Very roughly, all that is at the top of the hierarchy is compared to

masculine gender and all that is less valuable is compared with feminine gender. To finish with this, the value and the status of a person increases with time: important knowledge (about land and genealogy) is gained with age and is strictly men's businesses.

European social world made by the colonisation, if it isn't set up on the same symbolic order, gives women more or less the same status as is given to kanak women : the Western feminist movements of the 1970's and 1980's did not come in so far. But as there is no scientific literature concerning the gender topic within white society of New Caledonia, it is difficult to avoid its own representation of the situation on this point. By caricaturing the feature, one could say that the social status of the metropolitan women is made in reference to the status of their husband ; they are housewives and their identity is characterized by the fact of being "wife of". I take for granted the fact that metropolitan women were the majority of the people who were home and let me get in their house during my survey in the middle of week-days. The presidency and the vice-presidency of the fifth and very last government in NC, resulting from the political agreements are currently ensured by women, which encourages to be kept out of a too great simplification. But in the same time, one musn't deny a context branded with inequality between sexes and violence upon the women. To complete the impressionist painting of the gender question in New Caledonia, I will quote the eloquent results of an important new survey concerning violence against women, survey directed by Christine Solomon and Christine Hamelin. Their work revealed that during the last 12 months before the survey "one woman on four was victim of at least one physical and/or sexual assault, whatever was the context (in public spaces, within her couple or coming from an ex-boy friend, or violence within her family); 22% were victims of physical brutalities, 9% were victims of attempts of rape or of rapes. Among these women, 5% were victims at the same time of physical and of sexual assault. It is in the marital sphere that the women are exposed, but there is also a strong proportion of violences perpetrated by members of the family who are not the husband (or ex-husband)"(2004, p. 308).

**In this context, what about the fieldwork in the squats (spontaneous settlements) for a young female ethnologist ?**

With the Kanak men, who are the people with whom I spent the most time during these four years of fieldwork, my identity in the relationship with them was the subject of a permanent change according to the contexts. In the squats, the spontaneous settlements of Noumea, I was interested only in what was considered as men's business (like political movements and custom movements, organization of space and territories, old geopolitics matters concerning the area...). All are subjects about which men usually do not speak with women, especially young women. That is why, I suppose, they needed to emphasize another kind of features in me which would enable them to establish a relationship. This flexible identity was postulated according to the cast which my informants were interested in at one or another moment. Amongst the several cast they decided for me to play, I have been alternately : young woman, i.e. almost nothing, which meant someone to whom it is not necessary to answer or to speak

French. There are nearly about thirty kanak languages, of which some are spoken only by very few speakers. Then actually everyone speak french, more or less, according to the degree of schooling, wich is in french. Another moment, I was seen as an agent of the French Institute for Development, which was the scientific institute I was working for. This cast was emphasize when people need to be driven somewhere in the city, because I had a car branded with the IRD name on the doors. When seen as an IRD's agent, I was also asked about previous researches on land tenure or genealogies. Then I was useful, therefore, in the thepolitical situation of land claims. I was also sometimes seen as an ethnologist, i.e. worthy to talk to in order to make me write a convenient discourse for my informants. This position was very useful for my informats insofar as the political land claims grounds on cultural kwnoledge and on land tenure and linguistic knowledge which I could show off. Identity of me was not hold in the representation of kanak informants. But actually, it could not : because I was young, woman, and ethnologist, three features not valuable enough to be talked to. And I could say more : the two first (young and woman) set me at the lower rank on scale of kanak values, and therefore, no more worthy to hear them and to be talked to.

With the other interlocutors I met for this fieldwork, and with whom I did not have to build a strong relationship - like township administrators, local institutions or local scientific and educational institutions - my identity was always rather clearly the one of a young woman making her PhD. I mean, to be precise, that I was treated for one who couldn't count as a possible interlocutress in planing and development of scientific networks between France and New-Caledonia. These networks was men's business who already controled them. All the time of my PhD fieldwork, this situation suited me well. Because the representation which I had of myself was strictly circumscribed with my identity of student (of someone unachieved). But a few years later, the impossibility as a young woman to be counted as a real interlocutress in the institutional networks between France and New-caledonia weighed in my decision to stop my research in NC. Actually, as a young woman, I was never invited to the meetings between french colleagues and kanak institution in New Caledonia. I was never told in time that important kanak people that my colleagues and I were waiting for were coming in France to talk. The only ones who were told were male colleagues and our boss (a male ethnologist working on New Caledonia for decades). And to complete this point, I would add that in Noumea too, I wasn't received in appointment when I came in the name of my french team.

**As a conclusion, I will say a word of what happens to the relationships with close informants after a ten of years, in this context.**

When I am came back to Noumea in 2001, for a two months mission of fielwork, I lived at a wallisian 's family in a spontaneous settlement of a rather far suburbs of Noumea. The mission had two parts. In the one hand, I wanted tu study how the Kanaks, and other people including tourists, were dealing with the new Art and cultural centre (centre culturel Tjibaou). And on the other hand, I wanted to study the way in which Kanaks and Wallisians living

together in the spontaneous settlements, innovated in their own social practices in order to establish a custom talk. I came to realise that in the last few years, political project of the activists kanak in the spontaneous settlements had changed in an unexpected way. It wasn't any more side with the main independant partys. In the squatter settlements, my kanak informants preached a return to the land and to the oceanian values. When I asked about their definition of these oceanian values, they developed a number of points of which were respect of environment and kanak management of the local resources. In this list of new values to fight for was also in significant place what my informants gathered under the global name of typical oceanian family values. By these words, they mentioned a better respect of the social places/role reserved for women in one side, and for men in another side. They said that the recent French law about the quota system in the polls was antagonistic with their values. Women, as I was explained, were to learn to keep their place, and were to give up all prerogatives related to the political life of the country. In the end, I realised that I spent my days listening to people explaining how women's emancipation was actually an impediment standing against the kanak independence, according to the fact that it sapped one of the strongest oceanian social reference. In this discourse of my kanak informants, feminism, or at least reduction of the gender inequalities, took part of the colonial power.

For me, working in New Caledonia had not been a problem between 1993 and 1997. For this mission five years ago, I felt it was becoming difficult but still bearable. Actually, problems came because I have changed quite a lot during these years, making it impossible to deal with the reality of fielwork in NC. It is now beyond the limits of what I can bear, as a feminist woman. The "visionary pragmatism", heart of the intellectual process of black feminism, as Patricia Hill Collins has written about it, appeared determinant in this move of what I can bear. In this critical theory, built on the close link between scientific knowledge and institutional power, as Foucauld had showed it before, attention relates to the processes, which make it possible to understand the daily actions within a more general social project. That is to say that when I am in France, at home, I am rather activistic in the fight against violences to women and to children. I am feminist, which mean concerned with the topic of inequality between men and women. All of this makes it morally and technically impossible to go on with these surveys with kanak men about land and political matters of the area, or about details of the ceremonies with Wallisians. The fieldwork is getting impossible to do because I cannot put my embarrassment aside when no woman ever attends the discussions. I cannot any more dodge the fact that during these hours of discussions I spend with men, women do a very hard housework (in the squatter settlements, there is not running water, no electricity, shops are quite far away in the city and few of the amilies have a car). I cannot any more turn aside from the question of casual violences against kanak women in New Caledonia. I cannot turn aside from this reality and keep my interests in the political relationships between Wallisians and the Kanaks, and how all of these people deal with the colonial situation. All things considered, I cannot accept any more the conditions of my fieldwork. Now at last, I changed of fieldwork and left NC.

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## Abstract :

The new political context in New-Caledonia makes people deal with various ethnies and groups of population. As far as possible, quite all of them try to build a peaceful society including everybody, men and women, young and old people. The situation is rather different in the oceanian slums, which have increasingly arose since the beginning of the nineties all around Noumea and within the vacant spaces of the city. In their political alternativ project for the country, Kanak men living in the slums focus on what could root them in a typical oceanian way. Very sexist attitudes on this purpose is lead at a top level, in everyday life as brought up as a political discourse. Both make it difficult for an ethnologist to bear a fieldwork survey.