

## A cunning invasion\*

*Georges Baudoux*†

TRANSLATED BY *Daryl Morini*‡

Clearly intent on defending his people's honour, the gentle Dalai responded to my taunts with: 'The Kanaks<sup>1</sup> aren't to blame for that one. Just you wait, I'll tell you one of the elders' stories. Then you'll see.'

What follows reflects his state of mind.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, this happened a long, long time ago. *Pirogues*<sup>3</sup> with men from the mainland had sailed to Yandé, Baaba, Tanlo,<sup>4</sup> and all the Nénéma islands<sup>5</sup> to say that the Pouébo tribe was preparing a great *pilon*<sup>6</sup> starting three nights from now, and that we, all us men, women, and girls, should come to Pouébo for the Chief's<sup>7</sup> great *pilon*.

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\* This is the first English translation of Georges Baudoux's 'A cunning invasion' (*L'invasion sournoise*, 1938), a short story based on the oral history of the Pouébo people, an Indigenous Kanak tribe of New Caledonia. Sources and discussion are included in the *Notes* section below. This is a translation of Georges Baudoux, *Légendes Canaques II: Ils Avaient vu des Hommes Blancs* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1952). This work is in the public domain.

† Georges Baudoux (1870-1949) was the first New Caledonian novelist. He worked as a cobalt and nickel miner in the northwest of the main island, where he collected Kanak oral history. He lived in Nouméa, Koumac, and Koné.

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Now that, my friend, was a party. All were merry and got to work doing things they knew. The women wove pandanus-leaf mats with long strips on each end to stop mosquitoes. They braided tapa belts<sup>8</sup> from bleached cane they beat against the water, and made soft tapa from the banyan tree's fibres.

Men carved and hardened spears<sup>9</sup> with fire and shaved their tips sharp; they tied strips of bat's fur adorned with tiny shells around them. With shards of rock and cutting shells, they scraped head-breakers out of wood.<sup>10</sup> They rubbed, polished, and buffed their blue serpentine, round, and triangular axes, as well as sling-bullets. These were all intended as gifts to be presented at the *pilon*, over there in Pouébo.<sup>11</sup>

They fashioned huge, hulking pots by kneading clay and fine gravel into thin sausages, which they stacked on top of the other in a circular motion, much as wasps make their nests. Now those were hard to do, pots. Many would crack when cooking over large fires. The elders knew how to make pots. We've forgotten how, in our day.<sup>12</sup>

The elders took care of the money made of seashell tips scraped against stone, which the Chiefs kept. The young did nothing at all. They always mucked around.

Impatient was the moon that crept forward while the Indigenous people made their sumptuous gifts on the islands. Chiefs and dignitaries met in a great council to decide on the departure date and journey's legs.

The *pirogues*, both the big tandem boats and smaller ones, were packed with food rations and lavish gifts.

Then, one after the other, they took off with the early southern breeze to assemble and wait on a sand island at the mouth of the Balabio channel.

Though they had been warmly invited and promised wonderful things, their minds would not leave them in peace. Entering a stranger's house with strength of numbers was sound policy.

The *pirogues* met on the island that would later be named Saint-Phalle, in memory of a dozen navy hydrographers massacred there.<sup>13</sup> While waiting, the Kanaks rested and caught the most in-

credible fish. The biggest were browned with smoke to preserve them for days.

Headwinds always pick up as you approach Pouébo. You constantly tack, and then tack some more. The *pirogues* drift off to the sides, almost going sideways like crabs. Even when sailing into the wind, the destination is reached in the end. But the work is so relentless that one's muscles are sore on arrival. Far better to travel by land breeze at night.

Before daybreak, long before even birds awaken, around the time when the morning star shimmers above the sea out beyond the surf-swept reef, the Kanak clan stirred to life when puffs of wind from the valley blew through a fire's embers and carried off the sparks.

Dry wood is a precious resource that should always be preserved. It's worth the effort of gathering and carrying around.

Making whining noises and rubbing their skin with saliva,<sup>14</sup> the Kanak clan stretched and sat back down in their *pirogues*. As lateen sails unfurled like fans, the square sails snapped so tight as to almost rip. Once again, the flotilla with braided wings glided off in silence, stirring up phosphorescent sea creatures' lights as it went. They flew, how they flew!

It's always cold at night with the land breeze up and as fog creeps between the valley floors. It stings the skin. The women lay on the ground huddled together under an old, saggy woven mat grown soft with use. They kept warm. Because the men are tougher than the women, they tried to stay warm as best they could without letting on that they felt cold.

The headwinds blew while the sun hung low. The *pirogues* now made for the coast, clinging to the reef that lines the coast opposite Amos. Since the *pirogues* still had water under their bellies, the men and women used poles to push against the seabed. In this way, they kept going, kept going towards Pouébo.

But the falling tide gradually beached the *pirogues*, which now scraped the bottom. To avoid splitting up the party, the smaller *pirogues* were stopped too. The whole flotilla rested there, strewn along the sand, not far from mangroves that dot the coast.

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Despite seeing coconut trees and several huts from the shore, no islander from Nénéma tried to contact the mainlanders. They knew these were friends, that there was nothing to fear. But the deep distrust that keeps men alive was at work. No risk would be taken without good reason. Some passed the time fishing near the *pirogues*, planning to seek shelter in them if the alarm were sounded. Those overcome by it gave in to sweet sleep.

The *pirogues* floated again before the sun had fallen behind the mountains. The Nénéma squadron soon bristled with poles all pushing against the sea floor. In this manoeuvre, they showed all the skill and endurance that heredity passed down to them.

They reached their objective in the dead of night. The flotilla was tied in place by driving hard poles into the coral.

But it wasn't the right time to go ashore. Protocols established by ancestral custom had to be observed. As they awaited dawn, fires were lit on purpose-built mounds of sand from materials stored aboard their *pirogues*, so that they might sleep soundly around cosy hearths that drive away the dew.

Gentle was the night they spent beneath the radiant stars as dampened sounds wafted in from land. The jittery cricket's hum. The screech of squabbling bats. A prowling heron's raspy call.

In the morning, a delegation of Nénéma islanders stepped onto the beach in full daylight. It was led by a Chief wearing vine around his waist and a ceremonial loincloth with seashells.<sup>15</sup> Four diplomats followed him. Each wore the same clothes and clutched bird-shaped head-breakers. Slingshot pellets hung from their ears. They were off to make contact with the great Chief of Pouébo.

A coterie of guards and advisers surrounded the Pouébo Chief while he awaited this delegation. When it had arrived within ten paces, the islanders froze in place. The Chief of their Yandé tribe spoke first.

'Great Chief of Pouébo, you invited us to your *pilon*. We come to enjoy your hospitality and bring you entrails from our island fish.'

The Chief of Pouébo responded:

‘We’re friends who go way back. You are guests of the Pouébo tribe. You’ll eat our yams, taro, bananas, and our *pilon* you will dance. We’ll show you to the huts in which you’ll sleep.’

The Chief of Yandé stepped forward, holding out in his fingertips a finely bound package of white-banyan bark, which he handed over with these words: ‘Great Chief of Pouébo, I give you our fish entrails. They are yours.’

The connection was established once the Pouébo Chief received these gifts. Without breaking the reserve proper to the solemn character of the ceremony, the advisers exchanged a few words.

As the two chiefs met, most likely to discuss matters of state, a man went to great pains to carefully unwrap the soft banyan bark around the precious gift. Once he had opened it, he presented it to his Chief with an air of utmost deference, as was required.

Strings of nacreous shell shards tied off with bat’s fur tassels on each end lay inside. There were also *ouacivi*<sup>16</sup> necklaces and bracelets made from rare shells’ whorls.

This Kanak money was a currency. It facilitated such encounters. Its value was calculated from the work, skill, and patience it took to make. Once the wealth of these gifts was appraised, and with no word of thanks going unnoticed, the Chiefs retired to the area reserved for guests.

The Nénéma people performed various rituals to accept gifts of huts and cooking pots from their hosts, the latter gift being a symbol of the Kanak family.

All the Pouébo people withdrew discreetly to avoid gawking out of idle curiosity, which could put them at a disadvantage in the strangers’ eyes. They let the Nénéma people get ready.

As soon as the rising tide allowed them to float, the *pirogues* were beached in front of the huts. They unloaded much-depleted linen stocks, with clothing among it.

The gifts they made were carefully stored away from sun and rain, to keep them from fading.

While the Nénéma built makeshift dwellings, and not failing to show deference to the round, high-peaked huts reserved for dignitaries, the Pouébo women,<sup>17</sup> hunched under loads tethered to their

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shoulders with straw straps, lugged over and dropped off yams, taro, and all kinds of edible plants courtesy of the Pouébo tribe.

Giving themselves haughty airs, the men pretended not to have seen the women and stepped out of their way. This was their way of letting women take care of the logistics, the giving and taking of supplies. Men were supposed to stand above such trifling domestic chores.

Should a man more prideful than the others block their way, the women walking past him would bow deeply out of humility ingrained over millennia. They would almost be crawling on all fours.

The Nénéma people barely left their living quarters while waiting for the *pilou* to start. Casting a suspicious eye over their hosts, they felt no urge, since they had not been invited, to speak to acquaintances in whose company they felt ill at ease. They passed the time sleeping and eating to gather strength, and doing little else.

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Reassured by how well the Nénéma were behaving on their land, the Pouébo tribe visibly warmed to their guests. They came over to see the Nénéma and told them of things strange, things utterly unknown, which to them had been revelations.

They told a story, whose details changed to fit the listener's views, about two huge *pirogues* with no outriggers, their masts a pine tree high and sails pulled tight every which way, whose crews had alighted here in Pouébo.<sup>18</sup> Instead of lowering a heavy rock tied to a vine, these *pirogues* latched onto the seafloor with hooks and ropes thrown in the water. *Splash.*

Men had come ashore on two lighter craft, these bulky *pirogues* without outriggers that moved by picking up water in their long legs. Not knowing who they were, the Kanaks watched on while hiding behind bushes. There was no doubt about it. These men were white. There were red ones, too. These men looked nothing like Kanak albinos.

A few of these white men came ashore and walked across the beach. Their heavy, bark-girt footsteps crushed the rocks. The many

other white men stayed in their *pirogues*. Those Kanaks who know things well saw neither dread nor anger in these men.

Their fears waning, the more daring Kanaks, who wielded spears, slings, and head-breakers, showed themselves to the white men. They sought explanations for this unannounced landing.

The white men, from whose bodies hung all sorts of things that must have been weaponry, advanced on the Kanaks. They gestured, spoke, and laughed.

The Kanaks hesitated, watching them closely. Should they attack? Or should they wait? When they saw white men wrapped in strips of skin, or maybe soft woven mat, down to their legs for warmth and wearing baskets on their heads with hair as stiff as banyan beards,<sup>19</sup> the Kanaks also laughed and gave no more thought to attacking.

Upon reaching the Kanaks, the white men took them gently by the hand and smacked them on the shoulder. They spoke so quickly in a language no Kanak could speak.

The white men and Pouébo Kanaks made friends by means of exaggerated gestures, modulating their meanings with subtle signs, and used their bodies to communicate.

Without letting go of their instinctive distrust, the black and white men sat on coconut tree trunks lying in the dirt.

The other white men stayed seated in rows in their *pirogue*. Pressed between their hands and knees, they held long sticks with pointy ends and very broad bases. They glistened like the morning dew. The Kanaks had never seen such weapons: spear on one end, head-breaker on the other.

Two white men, who were sitting on a coconut tree trunk, took out little pieces of wood which they filled with dried, finely chopped herbs. Next, they sucked the ends of the wooden pieces and blew out smoke from their mouths. It smelled nice.

While the two white men ate smoke, the Chief arrived with his sorcerer and the all-knowing elders.

The great Chief, the white men, the sorcerer, and elders all spoke in turn. In the end, each understood that the white men wanted to

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take back fresh drinking water and wood to make fire aboard their great *pirogues*.

The whole tribe, usually apathetic, was struck by this strangest of sights and gathered around where the men not quite like the others had disembarked. They stood a hundred paces from the delegation of diplomats, whom they surrounded in the shape of a semi-circle that spilled onto the beach.

For a long, long time, the Pouébo Chief, his advisers, and the sorcerer, who was growing violently animated, talked and talked. This was a serious matter; it upset all customs. The white men awaited a response. But, still, the Kanaks talked and talked.

A white man, probably a chief, who was sick of waiting handed the Pouébo Chief an object as round and flat as a river rock. It was the colour of those rocks that poison the water.<sup>20</sup> A man's head was displayed on one side, tree branches on the other.

The Pouébo Chief grabbed the rock that looked like it might be a shell's operculum<sup>21</sup> or the seed of a tree. Joined by his sorcerer, they studied it a long time and deliberated.

When they had finished conversing, the Pouébo Chief told the white men that they could take river water with them, but that the wood was taboo.<sup>22</sup> Speaking very loudly, he also told the white men that they would need to go back to their country after they had taken the water. Then the white men, who didn't want to stay stranded without a single drop of water, went back to their great *pirogues*.

The next morning, three *pirogues* carrying many men came ashore with the rising tide. One of them stayed on the water's edge. Two *pirogues* slipped between mangroves to enter the river, where they filled up their bellies with fresh water.

They left to empty themselves into the great *pirogues*, coming back to take in more water.

The *pirogue* on the water's edge did not budge while this was occurring. A couple of men lay down in the shade and fell asleep. The others remained standing and didn't let go of their weapons. The Kanaks understood at once that these men provided security for the whole group. These white men were shrewd. Surprising them would



be impossible. They wouldn't let themselves be eaten like mere dugongs.

One of the white men spoke to a Kanak, whom he beckoned over with a hand signal. Miming the activity with vivid gestures, the white man got across to the bewildered Kanak that he wanted a woman. The Kanak shook his head and clicked his tongue to convey that he couldn't, and that this was a bad thing.

To sway the Kanak, the white man gave him a thing as long and straight as the sea urchin's spike but that was firmer than rocks. The white man showed him that this particular spine could penetrate wood when driven in with a stone.

This Kanak's name was Timoin; he was the guy who lived in a hut at the base of the mountain. Timoin said yes. He made off with the spike that knew how to pierce wood. Timoin never came back with a woman.

The white men's two great *pirogues* stayed in Pouébo for three days. The white men went across to Poudioué island<sup>23</sup> to cut and steal wood. The Chief hadn't cursed the wood on that island.

The white men's *pirogues* were big, so big, they carried many men. The Kanak *pirogues* looked tiny beside them. The sorcerer had said that there lurked inside these great *pirogues* some white devils that could walk on water. After hesitating a long time, the Kanaks decided not to engage in a naval battle.

A morning came when the white people's great *pirogues* raised all their sails in the air. They lifted their hooks from the bottom of the sea while performing a *pilou* dance. And they went far away, beyond the big reefs. By night-time, they could no longer be seen from the mountain top.

This is what the Kanaks from Pouébo told their friends from Nénéma beneath coastal banyans as they awaited the great *pilou*.

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With his cigarette finished, Dalai picked up his story's thread, which plunged his tradition-steeped soul back into his ancestors' lives as he narrated it.

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The big *pilou* at Pouébo isn't worth narrating; all big ones are the same. And yet, this one was not quite like the others. The Chief introduced into it a ceremony that the Kanak elders hadn't expected.

After a rousing speech by the tribe orator and the warriors' fierce dancing and leaping to and fro in simulated fights, the Great Chief of Pouébo appeared at the foot of a tree that doubled as his rostrum. From here, he called forward all adults, parading before them the gift that the chief of the white men from the strange country had given him.

It was a large bronze medallion with Britannia on one side, and symbolic palms and a date on the other. Never had any Kanak seen a *baoui*<sup>24</sup> like this one.

But this was nothing. After the procession had passed the Chief, it was then made to parade before the Kanak called Timoin, whom the course of events had made into an exhibitor.

A nail dangled from a long piece of string hung around his neck, a thick iron nail from a navy ship. Now, this was a wonderful thing. The Kanaks touched the nail, feeling its square angles and rounded head. They chipped their teeth against it to test its strength. They dreamed of the many uses that could be made of this hardy spike.

Though not the arrogant type, Timoin still felt proud to be the owner of this unknown tool, useful in all things, which he had bought only with the subtle act of tricking a white man who had wanted a woman. The whole tribe had laughed about it.

But glory comes with a price. As the legitimate owner of the hard, pointy object forged from an unimagined material, he no doubt gained in prestige but also aroused envy in others, exciting their covetous thoughts. Every Kanak would have liked to own that nail. Timoin knew this and grew worried.

The talk was that the Chief's non-perforated medal was hardly a catch. It couldn't be threaded with string to be worn as an adornment. Timoin's nail, meanwhile, was a precious tool that was also an elegant jewel when he slid it into the lobe of his ever-pierced ear.

After seeing the things that white men brought, and with the *pilou* officially opened, the Kanaks, men and women, returned to their huts before nightfall to gorge themselves, as was tradition.

As soon as the heavy blows of the fig-bark paddles, the muffled pounding of the bamboo echoing in the earth, the precise rhythm of dry wood struck in time sounded into the black night, the whole Kanak race rushed to the *pilou*.

This is when the real party began. The whole crowd pivoted in the dark around the main pole. The whole crowd gestured, pounded their feet, stomping the ground rhythmically. The whole crowd rubbed, felt, and stepped forward as one.

When, in thrall to the rhythm, they had rubbed against each other, inhaling the scent of man's animal passions, a sort of collective hint arose, a feverish lust taking hold of the gyrating mass of human flesh.

The expected occurred. The women's rolling hips captivated the men; the men fervently pressed against the women, who were tireless. The party reached its apogee. Dawn's first light put an end to the frolicking.<sup>25</sup>

The Nénéma islanders slept like logs. Some lay heavily slumped on straw, others on mats. Some were in the open air, others in tall, peaked huts, dark from being sealed shut. All were blissfully unaware of a devilish threat slowly enveloping them.

The *pilou* party lasted four days. At night they danced, they stomped the earth, without any break besides tiring interludes. In the daytime they slept, ate, and slept again. The tiredness that dulls the senses prevented the Nénéma from feeling the first, faint attacks of which they were the hapless victims. Only three old women with saggy skin whom the men neglected in the *pilou*, who only felt things dully and mostly felt regret, had noticed the cunning manœuvres targeting the Nénéma. They saw it, the old women did, but they didn't feel it and didn't speak.

The *pilou* celebrations ended for the good reason that the hosting tribe had run out of food. As was customary, after endless feasting it was time to chew the gooey bark of the *bourao* trees.<sup>26</sup>

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The departure was brought forward to avoid a famine. The women got to work picking up the tools, rolling up the mats, and loading all the supplies on the *pirogues*.

The three old women who knew but didn't speak gently lifted their mats from each corner, closing them with great care, picking up their fringes to avoid losing their contents. Rather than rolling them up as usual, these mats were carefully folded and tied up with vines. And these old women placed these packages into selected areas at the bottom of the *pirogues*.

The trip goes by quickly with tailwinds. The *pirogues* were already far away by the time their sails were fully deployed. At night, the squadron stayed on Baaba island. The next day, the Nénéma Kanaks split up, each group heading back to its own island.

And life resumed its gentle, leisurely course without a care for the days to come. Planting was easy and fun for everyone, fishing was a real treat.

But since coming home, a torment had befallen their homes. It even hung around their huts and under the shade of the guardian-trees under which people lay.

No one was at ease anymore. It stung, it itched, they had to rub themselves everywhere, by day, by night, even in sleep. One was still sore upon waking up. And the more time passed, the worse it became.

The most tortured men and women, who were sick of rubbing their skin raw, dove headfirst into the sea. That felt nice, but you couldn't live there forever. They had no choice but to go home, and again the itching would come back.

What sickness was this? The fish itch,<sup>27</sup> the Acajou tree inflammation,<sup>28</sup> the leaves that burn your skin like nettle.<sup>29</sup> No, it wasn't. And still, they searched and searched.

By applying all their skill to the problem, the brightest researchers had concluded that this kind of itch was caused by the changing appetites of tiny animals as fine as grains of sand that jumped, and bit, and hid in the dust.

It was only learned much later that the ever-nosy old women, who picked up and by nature hoarded all they found, had also wanted a turn at keeping something from the white men.<sup>30</sup>

With these words, Dalaï cracked up triumphantly and declared:

‘You see? You’ll never again complain that I have little critters around my hut. It’s the first white men who came to Pouébo that brought fleas to our country. We had none before them.’

What can you say? This idea, handed down by the ancestors, was deeply entrenched in his brain. It would have been impossible to prove the contrary. Were there or were there not fleas?<sup>31</sup> Now, that is the question.

## Notes

*These are not the author's notes. They are provided by Synkrētīc to clarify references and other details of interest. Initial page numbers (e.g. P. 9) refer to the original French text cited on p. 172.*

- 1 P. 9: Boudoux's *Canaques* is an antiquated form of *Kanak*, the Indigenous Melanesian people of New Caledonia.
- 2 P. 9: Boudoux is signposting that his story, as with many of his others, is claimed to be based on the oral history narrated to him by local sources, in this case a Kanak called Daläi, who thereby becomes the implied narrator.
- 3 P. 9: *Pirogue* is the French word for Kanak sailboats made from timber canoes, stabilised either using an outrigger or in some cases a second hull connected by a deck, and with one or two triangle-shaped sails like the modern sloop.
- 4 P. 9: The Yandé/Yade, Baaba/Paava, and Taanlo/Tâânlô/Taalo islands are clustered around the northern tip of New Caledonia's mainland. Today, they are part of the independentist-run Northern Province's Poum district.
- 5 P. 9: The Nénéma people live in the tribe of Titch/Thiic, on the above islands, and on Néba/Nééva/Yaba, Tiabet/Cavet, Tié/Ce, and Yenghébane/Yenjevan islands. Their Nélémwa-Nixumwak or Kumak language was spoken by over 1,100 people at the 2009 census. The Nénéma are part of the Hoot Ma Waap customary area.
- 6 P. 9: A *pilon* (or *pilon-pilon*), from the Nyelâyü language's *pilu* meaning 'to dance', is a traditional Kanak ceremony. It tended to involve group dancing by night in a circular motion around a pole for hours, as in this story. Colonial authorities began banning the *pilon* in 1854, fearing the war-like trances of the dancers. Referring to the same Hoot Ma Waap region, Denis Monnerie notes that the term *pilon* tends to be misapplied to other Kanak ceremonies, such as the welcoming ceremony that Boudoux also describes. See Denis Monnerie, *La Parole de notre Maison: Discours et cérémonies kanak d'aujourd'hui (Nouvelle-Calédonie)* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1993), 82.
- 7 P. 9: A *chef de tribu*, also known as a *grand chef*, is the sovereign of a tribe, a key unit in Kanak political life.
- 8 P. 10: In the Pacific, tapa belts were made from the inner bark of the banian and other trees, and here out of cane.
- 9 P. 10: *Sagaïe* are short, hard-wood spears with a range of 100 metres or more when thrown with a strap.
- 10 P. 10: *Casse-têtes* ("head-breakers") are clubs with heads carved into bird beaks, phalluses, and other shapes.
- 11 P. 10: Pouébo (*Pwevo*) is on the northeast coast of New Caledonia's main island. James Cook alighted just north of Pouébo in 1774, in the first recorded contact between European and Kanak people. The 100km trip to the other side of the island that the protagonist tribes in the story undertake by *pirogue* is historically plausible. Records suggest the Nénéma islanders were valued as allies for their naval skill. In October 1855-January 1856, Nénéma islanders threw their support

behind Pouébo in battles against the Hienghène people. At the time of the story, they are implied to be allies. Other sources speak of the allies being at war at a different time. See the chronology of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Nouméa, *Éphémérides de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, in Georges Coquilhat, *Ma Nouvelle Calédonie*, available at: <<https://gnc.jimdofree.com/nouvelle-cal%C3%A9donie-ephemerides-1853-1862/>>

- 12 P. 10: Baudoux describes part of the process of making the ceramic *marmite canaque*, as Europeans described it. The making of this utensil, formally known as the tradition of Oundjo pottery, emerged a number of centuries before colonisation. It did fall out of use in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Baudoux was writing, reportedly because of the growing availability of European cooking utensils. Maurice Leenhardt dated 1906 as the end of this style of Kanak pottery. See Isabelle Leblic, Françoise Cayrol-Baudrillat and Jean-Yves Wédoye, *Étude ethno-archéologique de quelques sociétés de potiers kanak (Ponéribouen et région de Hienghène)* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 1996), 9-10.
- 13 P. 11: Xavier de Saint-Phalle (1831-1850) was a naval officer cadet who died in a major battle between the people of Yenghébane and a French corvette. On 1 December 1850, the corvette *L'Acmède*, crewed by 248 sailors, is reconnoitring northern New Caledonia for its potential as a settler colony. Fifteen men take a tender boat to Yenghébane Island. Coconuts and biscuits are exchanged. The next night, Chief Dindi and the tribe's sorcerer decide to kill the French because, according to one version of events, they feared the white men would offer gifts to their enemies on the mainland. Hundreds of Nénéma and Daye fighters kill all but three of the sailors; the tribe adopts the three, one of whom is rescued. The ship's commander orders a punitive raid weeks later in which the Pouébo Kanaks reportedly take part, killing 24 Kanaks and destroying three villages. This incident, coupled with *L'Acmède's* recommendation that a penal colony be set up, reportedly impels Napoleon III to seize the islands in 1853. See Sylvain Joualt, *Monographie historique de la compagnie de gendarmerie territoriale de Koné et de sa circonscription* (Koné: Gendarmerie Nationale, 2018), 12-13; Bernard Brou, *Memento d'histoire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie les temps modernes, 1774 1925* (Nouméa: Editions le Santal, 1973), 43; *Bulletin scientifique de la Société d'études historiques*, Issue 79 (1989): 19.
- 14 P. 12: No explanation is given for why the sailors rub saliva on their skin. Baudoux describes a similar scene on land in a different story, where, on waking up, Kanak characters clean their skin and warm their muscles in this way. The implicit claim is that it is a morning ritual. See Georges Baudoux, 'Kaavo', in *Légendes Canaques I*, 18.
- 15 P. 15: The *bagayou* or *bagniyou*, supposedly from the Iaa language's *baga* for 'man' or 'male sex', was a penis-sheath.
- 16 P. 16: The *ouacici* is the small white shell of the *ovula ovum*, a cowrie shell used for necklaces. The word is common to at least ten Kanak languages, with slight variations. See Jean Mariotti, Mireille Soury-Lavergne, Bernard Gasser, *Nouveaux contes de Poindî* (Nouméa: Grain de Sable, 2002), 183.
- 17 P. 17: *Pouébo women*: Baudoux uses the word *popinée* throughout this story, a dated word used for Kanak women.

- 18 P. 19: Some local scholars see this story as evidence that Lapérouse's ships first visited Pouébo, and that the white men described in this story are Lapérouse's crew, as preserved in the local oral history of the Pouébo people. See Georges Baudoux, *Jean M'Barai The Trepang Fisherman*, transl. Karin Speedy (Sydney: UTS ePRESS, 2007), 25.
- 19 P. 20: 'Banyan beard' (*barbes de banian*) likely refers to the *ficus prolixa*'s aerial roots that hang down like long beards.
- 20 P. 22: 'That poison the water' (*cailloux qui empoisonnent l'eau*) is a probable reference to a sorcerer's curse or *tabou*.
- 21 P. 22: The operculum is the retracting disc in sea snails and gastropods, coveted in Asia as a source of incense.
- 22 P. 22: The placing of a *tabou* on the wood implies a protective curse had been placed on it if used by outsiders.
- 23 P. 24: Poudioué/Poudiou island, 10 nautical miles north of Pouébo. In 1774, James Cook passed the island on his second Pacific voyage, during which his scientist Johann Forster observed an eclipse. In 1793, French naval officer Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec, who was searching for the Lapérouse expedition, would be buried on the island.
- 24 P. 26: *Baoui* appears to be a synonym for a *ouacici* shell (note 16). See Jean Mariotti, *Takata D'Aïmos* (Nouméa: Grain de Sable, 1999), 16; and 'Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of New Zealand, *Te Reo*, Vol. 1-7 (1958): 7.
- 25 P. 28: The earliest colonial accounts of the *pilon* insinuated that it always led to debauchery. As Christine Salomon explains, they were an opportunity for unmarried men and women to meet during the dance and arrange to meet again later. Some fights might break out. Salomon analyses the power differential between male and female dancers. See Christine Salomon, 'Hommes et femmes: harmonie d'ensemble ou antagonisme sourd?', in *En Pays Kanak*, Alban Bensa and Isabelle Leblic (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2000), 322.
- 26 P. 29: *Bourao* trees (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*), found on the coast and some inland, are used in traditional Kanak medicine. The leaves are chewed and served as tea to heal the liver or for relaxation. The leaves' sap is also applied to wounds.
- 27 P. 31: 'Fish itch' (*gratte de poisson* or *la grate*) is a local term for ciguatera fish poisoning, typically caused by consuming a fish that ate the reef organism *Gambierdiscus toxicus*, whose toxins cause the skin to itch painfully.
- 28 P. 31: The *Acajou* or *Goudronnier* tree (*Semecarpus vitiensis*) is widespread on the mainland's west coast. Its fruit contains a resinous vesicant that can cause swelling and hard-to-treat ulcers. Though toxic when raw, the fruit's kernel can be eaten cooked. Jean Rageau, *Les Plantes Médicinales de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1973), 61.
- 29 P. 31: 'Like nettle' (*comme les orties*) may refer to an endemic plant some accounts call 'Kanak nettle' (*orties canaques*), possibly a species of endogenous *Urticaceae* in the nettle family which have stinging hair.
- 30 P. 31: This detail, according to which Kanak grandmothers brought back fleas from a Pouébo *pilon*, is supported in oral history from the same region. This confirms



that Baudoux built his narrative on local Kanak oral history. Cited in *Etudes mélanésiennes: Bulletin périodique de la Société d'études mélanésiennes*, No. 10-11 (1958): 144.

- 31 There is evidence that some species of ticks may have been introduced to New Caledonia by the first European ships. Local oral history supports the claim that 'the first two boats to stop in Pouebo, probably with La Pérouse, introduced ticks and a new disease.' Christopher Sand, Jacques Bole, A. Ouetcho, 'What Were the Real Numbers? The Question of Pre-Contact Population Densities in New Caledonia', in *The Growth and Collapse of Pacific Island Societies*, eds. Patrick V. Kirch, Jean-Louis Rallu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 318.