

## The first people\*

*Claire Moyse-Faurie*,<sup>†</sup> *Corneille Nonké*,  
*Philibert Nêkaré*, *Marinette Oundo*,  
*Marceline Até*, *Maria Thavivianon*

TRANSLATED BY *Daryl Morini*<sup>‡</sup>

### I

#### Corneille Nonké, *The first man*<sup>1</sup>

This character who lives here, he was the first human being. This individual [*half-man, half-woman*]<sup>2</sup> was the tribe's first inhabitant, our ancestors didn't exist. He died, and several years later our elders came and settled here in the tribe.

This individual who once lived here is called Bwîhîcû. Nobody would walk by down there. He'd catch people and eat them raw. He would choose someone rather portly, he would pinch them to see if there was much to eat on them before killing them to eat them raw.

His skeleton was in this cave, but it has disappeared. Destroyed by the years, we're not sure where it is anymore.

It's the end of the story. It's finished.

---

\* Dr Claire Moyse-Faurie collected, transcribed, and translated this oral history into French and graciously gave permission for it to be published in this English translation for the first time.

† Claire Moyse-Faurie is Professor Emeritus at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). She holds a PhD in linguistics from Université Paris 5 and lives in Paris, France.

‡ Daryl Morini is editor of *Synkrêtic*. He holds a PhD in International Relations (UQ) and is based in Canberra.

## II

### Philibert Nékaré, *On Kanak men and women*<sup>3</sup>

I would like to speak to you about the way of life of the Kanak [*Indigenous New Caledonian*] man. Kanak men see themselves as pine trees while the others, women...women, we Xârâgurè people compare Kanak woman to a poplar tree, and man to a pine tree.

The pine tree, that's the chief of the family, the tribe, and the clan.

And women have many meanings, which people have forgotten. Woman is the poplar. It is she who gives life, who multiplies the clans, who makes the clan multiply, woman does.

This is what the elders say, that it's the beginning and the end, the magnania plant, the beginning and the end, woman is. She makes clans multiply by their roots. We are here through her. We meet each other thanks to women.

The elders say we come from one single belly. We eat one single share of food, we make sacred one single clan thanks to one woman, this woman who multiplies the clan. That's it.

This is how we speak. White people express themselves in their own way but it all comes to the same, when speaking of women white people say the same thing.

Woman is the Kanak poplar, she multiplies the clan. He, the pine tree, the male, stays upright, he stays upright, he is the chief. He is upright in the clan, in the family, in the council of chiefs.

That's custom, that's how we see ourselves in our Xârâgurè land.

## III

### Marinette Oundo, *The women of Koum*<sup>4</sup>

Koum is up there in the mountain range, a mountain peak where the elders once lived in the time of the elders.

Thus, in the time of the elders the people in that part of the mountain range never went fishing. They never went fishing. They'd wait for the coastal people to come up to meet them to trade their products, exchanging seafood for goods from the land. They'd

## *Synkrētic*

come from above, they'd come down and meet up. They'd come down with goods from the land. They'd meet people from the coast who would come up to give their seafood. They'd meet them and they'd give them their seafood, then they would ascend from there, where they'd met, while the others went back down.

One day, three women decided to defy this taboo that the elders had decreed. They wanted to see the seashore. They know that they will have to hide at night. They go fishing down by the sea, they want to go see what it's like on the seashore. They will set off while the others are still asleep. They will go down to the seashore. They'll come down and find that spot where they know they'll be able to fish, to quickly fish during the night, and they'll head back up while the elders are still asleep.

These women went down. They went all the way to the seashore and began to fish. They fish and fish. They pick up shells and fill baskets with them. When their baskets are full, they figure that they should start to head back up.

One goes ahead and starts to climb the mountain as she sees that dawn is upon them, that dawn is coming from over there. She tells the other two to hurry up and climb. She starts to climb the mountain but thus it is that the sun is rising, and she is turned to stone on the way up, while another is changed to stone on the seashore, and the third was changed to stone on the reef.

It's all over, the sun caught them by surprise. They transgressed the words that the elders had spoken, those which exist and that we explain in the tribe. This is how we do it: we meet, we trade, and it's finished. These women, they came from up there, they did this, they went fishing.

That's it, they went back up, the sun rose, it was over. So, the elders saw it and it's as if they had put a curse on them. They cursed them because they had transgressed.

One climbed up the mountain, she will stay there for all time on the mountain side. One sits here, the other there. Nowadays, these women sit there today. They never came back to the Koum tribe.

That's how it is, they transgressed the tabou, the proscribed behaviours. That which the elders had put in place. They remain

sitting for all time, they have turned to stone, these women are here until this day. They turned to stone, these women, and are seated there today, even to this day they're still seated in those stony areas up there today, these women. It's those stones we can see today. They are seated over there to this day.

That's why when the elders talk about certain behaviours to abide by, you have to really listen, because if you don't listen to what you have to do, something might well happen to you.

Well, that's what happened to those women. They sit there forever. That's why when you pass by on your boat, we say that it's the Koum women sitting there. They're sitting over there. The story is over.

#### IV

#### Marceline Até, *The sacred eel*<sup>5</sup>

So, there is a little creek, its name is Fabwèèwi, in my father's field. There is a lizard there. Okay, I will tell its story. There was a day, some time ago, when my dad went, he went to clear his coffee plantation. It's far off in the distance. He arrives on his coffee plantation, he starts to clear the field as he enters it.

An elder comes by. That elder is a mountain. A mountain that looks like an island. It's sloped, with trees growing on it. And there are stones on its back. Lots of different weeds grow on it.

The mountain gradually comes down. It comes down, and down, and down, it finds the old man by the little creek, where he is clearing his coffee plantation.

A cry rings out, getting louder and louder. It's the mountain. It's singing, crowing like a rooster.

The old man searches around, he looks and sees an eye that's moving. He speaks to it: 'Hey, you there! Keep going! I didn't come here to bar your path. I came to clear my coffee plantation.'

The mountain has by now come down and drops where the two creeks branch off. It was shaped like an island. It stayed there for all time. This island has always stayed there. Now, we're beginning to do things on it.

## *Synkrētīc*

It is divided into two small creeks. One of those creek forks is good. But the other one, we used to go fishing in it before, only catching bits of eel...its head, tail, and body. All the bits would wriggle. This is a sacred place. The elders have said that it's now fine for us to use. But we aren't allowed to go and eat the bits of eel. Or else we'll fall sick.

But the name of that creek is Fabwèèwi. Fabwèèwi, well, on one side it's good but bad on the other. Famûnaawè is one of the creek's forks, the other side is Fabwèèwi.

It's finished.

### V

#### Maria Thavivianon, *The chief's chicken*<sup>6</sup>

There once lived a chief, the chief of the Ema tribe. He used to feed a chicken. There was another person, this person killed and stole the chicken, cooking it to eat it.

The chief awaits the chicken, calls the chicken, the chicken isn't there. He thinks that maybe he, the other man, had killed it. He calls it.

The man is questioned, he questions him. The man says that he's not the one who killed the chicken.

The chief calls everyone. They discuss the theft, and the disappearance of the chief's chicken. They interrogate the suspect who says that, no, he's not the one who killed the chicken.

So, the chief says: 'I will call my chicken.' He calls it. He calls the chicken. The chicken responds, it responds from inside the man's stomach. 'Well, you said you weren't the one who killed the chicken, and yet the chicken has made its first cluck! It squawked in your stomach, you've already eaten it.'

The chief punished him with labour for having lied as well as for the theft.

That's the end.

## Notes

- 1 Corneille Nonké, 'Le premier homme', October 2010, in Claire Moysse-Faurie, *Field archives from New Caledonia*, Pangloss Collection, CNRS, available at: <[https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?lang=fr&mode=normal&oai\\_primary=cocoon-527ca321-1ed8-3477-b19b-78c5056e8340](https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?lang=fr&mode=normal&oai_primary=cocoon-527ca321-1ed8-3477-b19b-78c5056e8340)>.
- 2 Notes in square brackets are provided in the researcher's original French transcript.
- 3 Philibert Nékaré, 'Kamûrû ngürû the Kanak', 12 October 2010, Pangloss Collection, CNRS, available at: <[https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai\\_primary=cocoon-ca3f4452-c1ed-4c89-9b78-b88eda4d1dec](https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai_primary=cocoon-ca3f4452-c1ed-4c89-9b78-b88eda4d1dec)>.
- 4 Marinette Oundo née Tonwiri sii., 'Story about women of Koum', 14 October 2010, Pangloss Collection, CNRS, available at: <[https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai\\_primary=cocoon-da586a73-2cd9-41a4-b13b-7a0b264fd19f](https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai_primary=cocoon-da586a73-2cd9-41a4-b13b-7a0b264fd19f)>.
- 5 Marceline Até, 'Anguille sacrée', 6 November 2010, Pangloss Collection, CNRS, available at: <[https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai\\_primary=cocoon-1a8d9eec-88db-47dc-a55c-410ec56285fe](https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai_primary=cocoon-1a8d9eec-88db-47dc-a55c-410ec56285fe)>.
- 6 Maria Thavivianon, 'Histoire du coq d'Ema', 7 November 2010, in Claire Moysse-Faurie, *Field archives from New Caledonia*, Pangloss Collection, CNRS, available at: <[https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai\\_primary=cocoon-72d15667-9e75-3953-9a93-e1c29fd04d46](https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/show?oai_primary=cocoon-72d15667-9e75-3953-9a93-e1c29fd04d46)>.