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The Emergence of an Autonomous Political Arena in Ouvéa: An Ethnography of Its Local Council

16

Mélissa Nayral

Abstract

The sessions of the Ouvéa local council attract the ethnographer's attention because of the discrepancy between their discussions and local daily life on the island. On the one hand, these sessions look like any other local council sessions, including those of metropolitan France. But on the other, they also present various peculiarities characteristic of Ouvéa's social and cultural context.

As elsewhere in the world, the organisation of political power observed and experienced during local council sessions is not simple. On the contrary, it exhibits hybrid characteristics from both a French institutional republican political world and from the so-called Kanak customary political universe. This chapter explores what J.-M. Tjibaou named "colonisation within the Republic" (Tjibaou, *La présence Kanak*. O. Jacob, Paris, 1996) by exploring this aspect of hybridity in a case study based on a long-term ethnography of local political practices and, more particularly, of the local council sessions held between 2007 and 2010.

Keywords

Political anthropology · New Caledonia · Ouvéa · Local council · Autonomous political arena

16.1 Introduction

The sessions of the Ouvéa local council attract the attention of ethnographers because of the discrepancy between their deliberations and local daily life on the island. On the one hand, these sessions look like any other local council ses-

sions, such as those of metropolitan France, but on the other, they also present various peculiarities characteristic of Ouvéa's social and cultural context. This particular "political spot" (Abélès 2007, p. 13), the local council, is occupied by men with customary responsibilities and high status, along with women who, by definition, have no such responsibilities. The customary political organisation of Kanak chiefdoms, which includes both councils and the council of elders, is characterised by a strict distinction between men, who have a monopoly concerning public speaking, and women who, while not necessarily excluded from political knowledge, have no place in the so-called political life of the chiefdom (Nayral 2018). There are also other men who do not belong to the first category of prestigious, fairly powerful men. This recent and particular configuration of the local council, as well as the political practices observed during these meetings, call into question the relationships between Kanak custom and French republican institutions, which both possess their own forms of political organisation. As elsewhere in the world, the organisation of political power observed and experienced during local council sessions is not simple. On the contrary, it exhibits hybrid characteristics from both an institutional republican political world and from the so-called customary political universe.

This chapter seeks to analyse the way in which hybridity can emerge from different levels of organisation and control within the territorial community of Ouvéa. It explores a case study based on observations of local council sessions held between 2007 and 2010. Although these observations are thus slightly dated, they remain relevant and useful because the general local political situation regarding local councils is much the same now as it was a decade ago and the current mayor held the same role in 2010. In order to introduce the situation in 2010, the chapter will first summarise how Kanak people have progressively become part of Caledonian "municipalities" (local councils) since the end of the *code de l'indigénat* ("native regulations") system in 1946.

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16.2 From Being “Indigenous” to Becoming a Member of the Local Council (*Conseiller Municipal*)

16.2.1 Citizenship and Republican Elections

From the arrival of the French administration in New Caledonia in 1853, Indigenous Kanak people and Europeans were treated differently. However, these differences were only formalised in 1887 with the creation of a system of administrative law codified as the Native Regulations (*Indigénat* in French), which made a distinction between citizens and indigenous non-citizens. As in Algeria or Cochín China where this regime also existed, Caledonian “native non-citizens”, in other words Kanak people, were subjected to French sovereignty but could not vote. This discriminatory political system had a criminal equivalent as well as a civil jurisdiction, which also made a distinction between citizens and “natives” who remained subject to their own traditions and customs. “Citizens” and “native non-citizens” were therefore differentiated by a triple discrimination affecting political rights and criminal and civil law. However, the official definition of the “native” (*indigène*) only appeared in 1915.

In 1946, while the civil distinction remained, the other two distinctions, political and criminal, were removed (Merle 2004). It was then, in 1946, with the abolition of the “Native Regulations” (*Code de l’indigénat*), that the Kanak started to be considered as “natives from New Caledonia” and therefore began to be able to participate in elections for the very first time. It should be noted that the electorate at this time only included 10% of those Kanak people old enough to vote. In 1951, this figure increased to 60%, before finally reaching 100% in 1956 (Kurtovitch 1999). We should also add that the 1956 elections saw a high participation of Kanak people (Soriano 2000a, p. 243). However, this participation was not simple even for Kanak leaders themselves. Soriano, who has done in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, writes that, due to their hold over the Kanak population, it was the mission schools that actually controlled this process (Soriano 2000b, p. 88). He stresses the missions’ influence over the Kanaks’ electoral mobilisation, considering that “it is on the one hand, what made people vote massively, and on the other hand, what made people vote upon its elite’s recommendations” (Soriano 2000a, p. 251). It was the fear of a rising local communist movement that led both the Catholic and Protestant Churches to ensure that Kanak people entered politics. UICALO (Union of Indigenous Caledonians Going for Freedom within Order (UICALO) and the Association of French Caledonian and Loyaltian Indigenous

People (AICLF),¹ two missionary-inspired parapolitical organisations (Kurtovitch 1999), were the most prominent movements. As Wittersheim has also written, “churches are what encouraged and set up the natives’ participation in politics” (Wittersheim 2003, p. 64). In addition, Trépiéd stressed the “social control practiced by collective structures (chiefdoms, churches, clans)” and emphasised the role of churches in controlling “the Melanesians’ vote” (Trépiéd 2007, p. 59; 69). My research has not allowed me to do such an analysis in Ouvéa; however, I would like to underline how close political and religious local networks are to each other, to the extent that they are embedded in one another. I would also like to highlight that, in New Caledonia, all the Christian churches have always played a big part in daily life, just as they do in the territory’s republican political life.

As mentioned above, during the 1950s and 1960s, the missions encouraged Kanak people to actively participate in republican elections, which led over time to a form of “great respect for democratic institutions” (Wittersheim 2006, p. 101). From this period on, Kanak gradually became involved in republican institutions, in an institutional logic that they abandoned in the 1970s when they radically protested against the entire colonial situation. When the Matignon Accords were signed in 1988, “once and for all, Melanesian leaders became involved in the republican system” (Soriano 2000b, p. 91–92) but this time from a different perspective.

16.2.2 The Municipality of Ouvéa

In New Caledonia, the first municipal commissions were created in 1879 on the main island Grande Terre, and only French citizens were allowed to take part in them. In 1953, these municipal commissions were opened up to mainland Kanak people, and at the same time, regional commissions (the equivalent of the municipal commissions mentioned above with a different name) were created in the Loyalty Islands, including Ouvéa. However, the first elections did not take place until a year later, in 1954. In 1961, both municipal and regional commissions became “municipalities”. In 1969, with the 3 January 69-5 law, 32 of the 33 current councils of New Caledonia, including that of Ouvéa, were given a new administrative and legal statute, evolving towards the status of “full exercise municipality”. This term meant that it was

¹UICALO: Union des Indigènes Calédoniens Amis de la Liberté dans l’Ordre; AICLF: Association des Indigènes Calédoniens et Loyaltiens Français.

(and still is) a civil territory where French common law was – and still is – applicable (Trépiéd 2007).²

In 1990,³ the financial and administrative authority of France over the municipalities was abolished and taken over by New Caledonia. They now have the same rights as French municipalities, except in relation to laws concerning economic development, and territorial planning and development. They have autonomy in public finances, which come under the jurisdiction of a larger institution: the provinces.

Like French municipalities, those of New Caledonia are legal entities with their own budget and subject to public law. Local councils consequently have considerable decision-making power. In spite of this, it should not be forgotten that since 1999,⁴ all New Caledonian municipalities have come under the authority of one or other of the three local provinces, that for Ouvéa being the Loyalty Island Province, each with its own substantial budget.⁵ That is why some very important decisions related to Ouvéa are taken in the neighbouring island of Lifou, the administrative centre of the province. As in France, all the municipalities of New Caledonia, as republican territorial collectivities, are free to manage their own affairs through an elected board: the *Conseil Municipal* (local council). Once elected by the population, the board elects from among its members a mayor and his or her councillors. As a government official, the mayor can sometimes have specific roles, in particular regarding the management of the registry office and military matters.

The municipality of Ouvéa had 3401 inhabitants at the last census (ISEE 2019/2019), most of whom are Kanak. Unlike Kone on Grande Terre, where challenging and contested colonial relationships progressively led the Kanak to political power (Trépiéd 2007, p. 60), since its first mandate in 1954, the local council of Ouvéa has always been run by Kanak teams, most of them affiliated to the pro-independence political party *Union Calédonienne* (UC). (Archives de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (Nouméa) n.d.).

It is nonetheless difficult to rigorously investigate these political affiliations in much detail, since local records on this topic are lacking. Firstly, the local council building was burnt down during the “events of Ouvéa” in 1988, a paroxysmal episode in the biggest social and political crisis ever faced by New Caledonia, and the records stored there since the 1950s were hence entirely destroyed. Secondly, Ouvéa’s

local council has been working in a new building since 2009, and moving from the old building to the new one has caused problems regarding the storage of about ten boxes containing amongst other things the registers of births, marriages and deaths and election results. Consequently, besides oral memory and digital information,⁶ the only official written documents available today in Ouvéa are the municipal registers written during local council sessions since 21 February 1987. These registers, which often have blank pages, only mention UC (pro-independence party) mandates, apart from 2002 to 2008 mandate held by PALIKA (another pro-independence political party, which has been running the council since 2014). Before proceeding with this analysis, it should be pointed out that though the interviews and observations conducted in various situations (meetings, councillors’ office, information desk, election campaign, etc.) constitute the core of the ethnographic material, these analyses are supported by a certain number of official documents, as well as posters, electoral lists, election results and many files from the 97 W series of the Nouméa archives. Amongst these is correspondence between the local police and both local and French authorities, along with letters sent by missionaries. However, all these documents provide us with little information concerning the socio-historical trajectories of the local council’s elected members.

The name of Ouvéa immediately evokes the sociopolitical crisis of the 1980s and “the Ouvéa cave affair”, which led to the death of 19 Kanak activists in the course of a military intervention, followed by the assassination of the Kanak independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou a year later. We could almost say that Ouvéa is a political issue in itself. However, as this appears to be something of a paradox, the island was neglected by public policies for long periods, and the geographer Faurie (2011) has demonstrated how the public authorities never bothered about the economic development of Ouvéa until its inscription as part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. In other words, if everything related to Ouvéa appears highly political, in some way or other, it also seems that everything is always viewed through the distorting prism of the so-called “Events” of the 1980s, which end up acting as a screen between the role they still play in everyday life on the island and everything else that is at stake locally.

Focusing on the municipality of Ouvéa and on its local council is therefore relevant, not so much in order to distinguish what is at stake on this scale regarding the destiny of

²The commune of Nouméa was created on 8 March 1879.

³Law N°90–1247, 1990, 29 December.

⁴19 March 1999 law.

⁵The municipality of Poya is however an exception to the rule as its territory is spread over both the North and the South Provinces (since 1989). ISEE, 2014.

⁶Wikipedia for instance provides a list of all mayors of the council: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouv%C3%A9a> (website visited 10/12/2020) which matches official Republican administrative records.

New Caledonia or even the Loyalty Island Province but rather to understand and to propose a new way of understanding how this local republican institution operates in a Kanak context, in which customary ideology occupies a key place but is not the only level of identification. As mentioned earlier, Ouvéa's local council implements protocol practices that somehow make it seem alien to local daily life while at the same time being steeped in customary norms.

16.3 The Local Council

The local council (*Conseil Municipal*) of Ouvéa meets about four times a year, in the new council building located in Hwadrilla, in the north of the island's central district. This building is part of what I call the island's "administrative centre". The place is not referred to as such locally, but it is where the Loyalty Island building, the local library, the bank, the customary council building and the airline sales office are found alongside each other. For this reason, there is free public transport to this administrative centre, and many people make their way there in order to complete administrative formalities (birth, death and marriage registrations, plane ticket purchases, banking, etc.). This place, which I perceived methodologically as a "neutral", favourable place for meetings, can also be described as a "spot for politics" (Abélès 2007, p. 13). Here people can run into each other, in particular people who do not routinely interact with one another: people from the north and the centre, European residents, administrative staff, tourists and local councillors who have working facilities there where anyone can meet with them.

All of the elected members of the local council gather in this building on a regular basis. Their meetings always take place in the council room, on the building's ground floor. This large room has rather expensive, modern furniture (a very long oval table around which there are about 30 large comfortable seats) and is always excessively air-conditioned. This is significant in a situation where the vast majority of local houses have no running water and some of them no power either. At the back of the room, there are four chairs in case anyone else attends the meetings. The council secretary delivers session convocations to the councillors by hand. Sessions are usually planned to start at 10 am but seldom do. They often start a lot later, when they are not postponed due to the lack of the required quorum (half of the elected members plus one):

It is 10:30, and they need two more members to reach the required quorum. The session cannot start. The mayor suggests that those who never show up to local council sessions resign from their functions. Joking, he adds: "We are going to hire staff specifically in order to pick them up from home and bring them here! We're gonna have to, you know!" (Fieldwork diary, local council, 27 September 2010)

Of the five sessions that I attended in full between 2009 and 2010, three had to be convened a second time due to the failure to gather the required quorum on the initial day. Moreover, from 1987 to 2010 period, I noted 127 postponed sessions out of around 250, that is to say roughly 50.8%, and the second sessions sometimes had only a few participants. These elements are sufficient to realise that local council sessions are not a priority for members except for a few deeply involved individuals: the mayor and one or two of his councillors. This is in contrast to what happens in customary life where at the time of weddings, funerals or any other type of ceremony, whether to attend is not even up for discussion. People are expected to do so, and they do. This observation indicates an initial distinction among the elected members of the council themselves. On the one hand, we have the "ordinary members", the grassroots, and on the other hand members whose habits and attitudes are closer to those of "professional politicians" (Lagroye 1994, p. 5).

16.4 The Institution's Considerable Role in Ideologies and Practices

16.4.1 The Importance of Protocol

In the local council room, the councillors' behaviour during sessions displays specific norms that cannot be observed in any other context in Ouvéa. For example, the dress rules for attending a session differ significantly from those that apply in daily life. This difference is especially noticeable among the "professional politicians" already mentioned. The mayor and general secretary wear trousers and buttoned up shirts, and every single time I attended the sessions and unlike everyone else, they were wearing closed shoes (the annual average temperature on the island is around 27 °C). A few other men also wear buttoned up shirts for the occasion although we know their daily clothes are more likely to be shorts, shirts and sandals or no shoes at all.

Yet this is not the case for all council members, and among those I call "professional politicians" most dress for sessions just as they would in any other context. It could be suggested that the solemnity of the moment is what makes people dress up, but it should be pointed out that in other solemn moments, like weddings or funerals for instance, appropriate clothing does not necessarily imply wearing Western clothes. However, this is what people do at these local council sessions.

Moreover, the high-ranking councillors spend a long time greeting every single person already in the room. They also usually walk in with briefcases, diaries and pens, and some of them arrive straight from their flight from Nouméa: several members of the Ouvéa local council, all of whom belong to the analytical category of "professional politicians"

(Lagroye 1994), no longer live on the island on a daily basis but base themselves in the Nouméa urban area. This is the case, for example, for the former mayor, B. Ounou. The fact that the mayor of Ouvéa did not live or lives only part of the time in his municipality seems to bother no one in Ouvéa. This situation might appear surprising as the mayor is thus in some respects positioned outside the municipality in which he occupies the highest office.

The general secretary and the mayor, whose offices are both on the first floor of the council building, generally walk into the room when there are already a few people present and their entrance usually signals the start of the session. When they enter the room, everyone stops talking. The secretary, who is carrying documents, follows the mayor, and the youngest member of the council is asked to confirm the councillors' presence:

S. Poumeli walks into the room, holding the council register and the list of councillors. The mayor whispers to her "S., you should check the list now". He starts talking.

10.25 am, the mayor: "I think we will soon be able to start. Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. Today we are going to deal with questions previously debated in the financial working group. I am going to ask the youngest member of our assembly to check the list. [...]"

(Fieldwork diary, 4 October 2010, session)

The mayor considers that the youngest member of the council has to start her apprenticeship in political life doing easy tasks and leaves her little alternative. During local council sessions, most of the councillors' speech is punctuated by references to "Sir, Mr Mayor, Mrs X the councillor in charge of this or that working group" etc. The behaviour and the way people speak to each other during council sessions are so different from what happens in everyday life that one can almost forget that this is taking place in Ouvéa. In daily life, it is very unusual to hear people speak French; people do not use the formal terms of reference in talking to one another, and when someone calls out to somebody else, only first names or kinship address terms are used (cousin, sister, mother etc.) and never their civil status (Mr, Miss etc.), as here.

Since 2001, the Ouvéa local council has also included women. Apart from the first and second councillors (in the council hierarchy), all the other women, wearing missionary or island dresses, always sit next to each other, directly opposite the men, who also sit next to each other. At customary events or during mass, men and women also sit in separate places. Here, at the council, their conversations are always whispered, in *Iaai* or *Fagauvea* (the two local languages) although, as mentioned earlier, local council sessions take place in French. These women councillors only speak according to certain modalities, and this is what makes them appear pushed aside during the discussions, which mostly happen on the men's side of the table and, more specifically,

at the end of the table where the mayor and the "professional politicians" are seated.

When discussing a particular council session with one of these women, I asked her why, in her opinion, no requests had been made by the working group on women's issues, and she said: "We do everything, we pray, we do weddings, but we never make requests" (Interview with M.A, 23/6/2009, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa).

With this statement, the councillor shows that women are strongly committed to custom – as she said "we pray, we do weddings" – to the detriment sometimes of their other social positions such as being a member of and actively participating in the life of the local council, for example by making requests. For these women councillors, other social roles come second to custom and the church, when they are not completely ignored. All these observations concerning behavior during local council sessions reveal a primary dividing line between councillors belonging to the "professional politicians" category on the one hand and, on the other hand, the ordinary members, the grassroots, on whom republican norms have less influence. This situation no longer sounds so surprising once we consider what Garrigou (2002) has written about the inevitable professionalisation of the political body, which is accompanied by the mastering of political strategies and appropriate behavior such as the ones described above.

16.4.2 The Mayor's Authority: Concerning New Elites

Maurice Tillewa was mayor of Ouvéa from 2008 to 2014 and has been elected once more in 2020 after a mandate held by Boniface Hounou between 2014 and 2020 (who was also elected mayor from 2002 to 2008). M. Tillewa is about 50 years old and comes from Banutr in the island's central district. As a professional nurse, he began as a health educator in Ouvéa before becoming a fully qualified nurse at the small local clinic (in Hulup) for five years. He was then trained to take higher responsibilities and was appointed local manager of the whole clinic. He did this until July 2010, before becoming the head of the Loyalty Islands Province delegation in Ouvéa. He describes himself as "one of the first political militants". He joined the UC political party in 1988, immediately after "the Events". He explains that he got involved in politics at the age of 25, as a strong supporter of Simon Loueckhotte (a well-known politician from the island whose opinions tend to the right and who was a long-term senator in the French Senate between 1992 and 2011), one his mother's close cousins. Tillewa says he got onto the council without having planned it. He says:

Well, in a way, I am the mayor, but it was never my plan. Three years ago, I wasn't even going to be up for election, and the party, I would say, was somehow lacking new leaders, especially here in Ouvéa. Hence, they needed someone to boost the list so as to, you know... therefore they asked my opinion on this. And in the end, I agreed. [...] Between two or three in the morning, I was asked, here Maurice, since you have a job with a lot of responsibility at the health centre, I was asked, Maurice, would you mind leading the list? Well, I said, ok then, why not? And actually, hum... no later than ten minutes afterwards, the meeting was over [he laughs] (Interview with Maurice Tillewa, mayor of Ouvéa, 22/10/2010, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa).

The mayor of Ouvéa has a good deal of social, academic and professional capital, unlike most people of his generation from Ouvéa who have never studied or had long-term high responsibility jobs. In light of these aspects, he clearly belongs to the sociological category of new elites. During local council sessions, he appears as an important and powerful character, whom people hardly ever contradict and to whom they show respect. For example, when the list of councillors is being checked, it is he who answers for those present. He also moderates and monopolises discussions during the sessions:

The second topic of the day regards public funding for non-profit organisations. The mayor starts listing various cases that still need dealing with:

The mayor: "C., can you please briefly present what's been discussed during the sessions of the working-group on culture".

C.: "Thank you Mr Mayor. As for the cultural and business..."

The mayor makes comments.

(Fieldwork diary, 4 October 2010 session)

Debates are supposed to be held during working group meetings, which take place before each local council session. So, during the sessions, the mayor very briefly jumps from one case to another without suggesting any form of discussion. Then, he asks a councillor to read out the proceedings:

The mayor: "Here, ladies and gentlemen, are there any objections? [nobody answers.] If there is no objection, we will then consider that all the councillors accept this. I am therefore going to ask Miss S. Poumeli to read out the proceedings".

S. Poumeli struggles to read the pre-written, typed up document, which only concerns budget figures (Chapter 65, article 65, 74 etc.). The very slow rhythm starts to annoy the mayor enough for him to interrupt her firmly.

The mayor: "Here, give that to me, I'll continue reading it out". He reads louder, faster and more distinctly. He finishes. No one says anything.

(Fieldwork diary, 27 September 2010)

Indeed, during the local council sessions, the mayor moderates the discussion, deciding who can speak and when and also when it is time for him to do so.

The mayor: "What about teaching, Mrs Gagne? I believe Nathalie has given you instructions".

J. Gagne: "Thank you Mr Mayor. First of all, the students..."

The mayor: [he interrupts her] "Start by reading what is already in the proceedings, that way it is easier for us to take notes".

J. Gagne begins to read the requests that are already in the proceedings. The mayor interrupts her again, starts speaking and continues reading that same document.

(Fieldwork diary, 4 October 2010)

As these two extracts from my fieldwork diary show, the mayor frequently interrupts women councillors, something he rarely does with male councillors. Moreover, since he speaks a great deal during the sessions, he in fact imposes a pace, characterised by a quite vertiginous decision-making rhythm.

The mayor: "Public funding for the non-profit organisation of Saint Paul tribe".

[He looks up. No one says anything. He then turns to a councillor from Saint Paul community.]

The mayor: "Mr Waisselotte, the non-profit cultural organisation? Is it active?"

G. Waisselotte: "Hum, yes, yes".

The mayor: "So! Here. 100,000 francs⁷ for the non-profit cultural organisation of the Saint Paul community. Are there any objections? It's ok then. About providing funds to the non-profit organisation of Loyalty Island students.... Well, ok we'll give them 100,000 francs".

[He looks up. No one says anything]

The mayor: "Ok, approved".

(Fieldwork diary, 4 October 2010)

These two extracts raise several questions. The first has to do with the lack of debate and discussion during sessions. The example above could lead us to believe that giving public funds to non-profit organisations is of no importance – which is true in a way since Caledonian municipalities have relatively large budgets – but it should also be understood that there are hardly more debates on other topics.

Local council sessions therefore appear to be mere formalities. Indeed, since the topics under discussion hardly ever generate any conflict, these sessions look more like rubber stamps of approval than real democratic spaces for debate. This realisation leads us to put the power of local councils into perspective. Although they are in charge of various domains, local councils remain subordinate to the customary authorities for everything concerning land. Therefore, it can also be speculated that there are other places where real debate takes place: in political party meetings and the mayor's office, as well as in the sessions held by the different working groups. Moreover, local council sessions prove to be areas where several dividing lines appear. The first concerns the standards of behaviour specific to this context and they have a variable influence over people. Certain external signs of compliance with the institution's norms (vocabulary, clothing, attitudes etc.) are obvious. This is particularly the case for the "professional politicians" who stand in contrast here with the "ordinary councillors", the grassroots. Unlike the former, the ordinary councillors do not dis-

⁷834,73 €. The current local currency of New Caledonia is indexed on the European currency Euro (€).

play these outer “institutional” signs conforming to institutional norms. However, these norms still have an influence over the “ordinary councillors” since not mastering them marginalises the latter. The second opposes two logics in the same sphere: the logic of the institution and that of custom. As I mentioned earlier, the mayor interrupts people. This practice, obviously tolerated and frequent during sessions, is nonetheless totally prohibited in customary life where it is on the contrary considered an affront to custom. A possible explanation of this situation would seem to be Lagroye’s hypothesis that “electoral legitimacy does empower” (Lagroye 1994, p. 10). This is precisely what happens with the mayor who, in daily life, is not overly prescriptive and yet in local council sessions can ask someone to speak or not or even speak whenever he thinks it is necessary. We can therefore theorise that, in this case, it is specifically his status of mayor that empowers him to behave thus without hurting or frustrating anybody. Likewise, during local council sessions the decision-making rhythm is extremely fast, which again is in strong contrast with customary processes. For in custom, decisions always require speeches of several minutes that must never be interrupted. When someone’s words give rise to a question, it is hardly ever asked directly, and the same could be said about answers to specific questions.

Hence, the discussions taking place during local council sessions differ considerably from customary practices. They are so different that sometimes they are their exact opposite. However, and in spite of all these differences, local council sessions also reveal a big influence both of and on customary ways of acting.

16.5 The Influence of Custom

16.5.1 Some Hybrid Files: The Airport Extension

In Kanak New Caledonia, very much as elsewhere in the South Pacific region, custom requires any piece of land given to remain given for ever (Ponsonnet and Travési 2015). As the mayor of Ouvéa explains himself:

M.T.: “We [the municipality of Ouvéa], we don’t own the land. We don’t. Unlike the other councils... of the territory, on Grande Terre [...]”.

M.N.: “So when the council negotiates land with one particular chiefdom and the elders agree to give that piece of land, does it remain the chiefdom’s property?”

M.T.: “Well... There is a customary act [a legally approved document] in which it is stated that the use of that piece of land has been given to the municipality”.

M.N.: “Does this agreement mention for how long?”

M.T.: “No, there is no such thing as duration”.

(Interview with M. Tillewa, mayor of Ouvéa, 22/10/2010, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa.)

These legally approved documents are much like life-long leases and therefore imply that the use of the piece of land given no longer belongs to its original “owner”. Likewise, they mean that people who inherit that same piece of land will not be able to cancel their ancestor’s contracts. Nonetheless, such situations do exist:

M.T.: “What you need to know now is that even when customary authorities agree to give a piece of land, sooner or later this piece of land is always claimed. This is a bit the case for the extension of the airport. We are currently working on the writing of a new customary act although years ago, the elders, they had already agreed but now, the young disagree! And they are protesting against the agreement that has already been signed. So, we have to rewrite an agreement. And in order to do that we have to discuss it again. And this is what we are currently working on”.

M.N.: “Talking about this specific case of the airport’s extension. Can an agreement be broken?”

M.T.: “[...] Well, the airport stays. But its extension is what we are discussing again. Years ago, they agreed to give a piece of land in order to build an airport but now we are being asked to renegotiate it. But this piece of land has already been given! In 1959 they’d already agreed to its potential extension because they thought it would become a big airport, but the young, they disagree, they disagree and they want to break the agreement. So we’re discussing it”.

(Interview with M. Tillewa, mayor of Ouvéa, 22/10/2010, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa)

The problems regarding the question of the airport require us to look deeper into the conflict and to try and understand why the mayor is so angry when talking about it. In Ouvéa, the airport, just like the port, is managed by the Loyalty Islands Province. The province is also in charge of the main road linking all the places under its jurisdiction: the airport, the health centre, the province’s local building and the port.

In 2010, the province decided to start extensive renovation work on a portion of the main road. Since there are no road construction materials or trucks on the island, it was decided to have them brought by a special cargo boat. Bringing rollers, pneumatic drills, sand, etc. to such a small island is very expensive, so in order to reduce costs, the province agreed to take advantage of having all this available and to also start extending the airport, a project planned in a legal document signed back in 1959. The land for the extension belonged to various clans from the community of Hulup. People from the province arranged a meeting in order to inform them about the building work to come. But, far from agreeing to this, they found the project useless and extremely expensive. This is when the mayor came into the picture. In him, the province saw a very suitable mediator, and this is how he became responsible for the airport extension issue. He was instructed to go and negotiate, with the help of the “Iaai customary council” (an institutionalised council of elders), for the plots of land required for the extension so that work could start on this once the road was finished. As a French collectivity, the municipality is enti-

tled to subsidies, which must be spent within a certain time. If not, they are deferred (rarely) or withdrawn (most of the time). Anger expressed by the mayor was in fact due to the fear of losing the public money designated for the airport extension, which would lead to everyone giving up the project definitively. The mayor was in a difficult position since when renegotiating for this land, he had to deal with custom and its way of managing land on the one hand and, on the other, the French state, based on radically different fundamentals. He also had to get the work started or the budget would be withdrawn. In this specific case, custom as a legal system appears far more flexible than the French legal system.

16.5.2 Occupation of Space and Ways of Speaking

The seating arrangements of the councillors remind us very much of what happens in customary contexts: men on one side, women on the other. The few, but rather long, speeches always end with “*oleti*” or “*de na guati*”, both expressions used to end speeches in customary contexts. They could be translated literally by “here, I’ve finished” or “well, I’ve finished now”. When they are pronounced, these words always call for a group “*oleti*” (thank you) from all those who have listened to the speech, just as in a customary context. Moreover, the speakers very often use other expressions employed in customary contexts. They speak in French most of the time, but sometimes they also speak in the *Iaai* or *Fagaueva* language, especially when their French is not too good:

A discussion begins about security in the local high schools and the fact that some parents have requested that a security company be hired to keep an eye on the buildings during weekends and school holidays. For the very first time in the session, a man (who is angry too) starts speaking. He wants to express his disagreement with the parents’ request. His French is not very good, and his sentences are regularly punctuated with expressions and words in *Fagaueva*.

P.I.: “Please forgive me for raising my voice, but where is the community police? The chiefs? People no longer show respect to anything or anyone. That’s all I wanted to say, thank you”.

(Fieldwork, 20 March 2009 session)

In this example and just as he would be expected to do in a customary context, the councillor apologises for “raising his voice” before saying what he has to say and ends his very short speech with “that’s all”, which is the French equivalent of “*de na*” in *Fagaueva*, his mother tongue. All these elements show the prevalence of customary habitus within the space of the Council sessions.

16.5.3 Customary “Gifts” and Hierarchy

Besides forms of behaviours and speech, which are also those used in customary contexts, it should be noted that “customary gifts” are also frequent during local council sessions. Visitors (researchers, people from the province, etc.) who wish to introduce themselves to the team before starting their own work may make these, or sometimes even, they may be made by council members themselves. This happened on 4 October 2010: M. Wea, one of the local councillors, had only just come back from the shooting of the movie “Rebellion” (released in 2012, dir. Mathieu Kassovitz) on Anaa island in French Polynesia:

Maki Wea wishes to present a gift to the local council to thank the municipality for backing this project and also to say “hello” to everyone still on the island [the shooting of the movie was still going on]. He wants to try and create a twin-island partnership with the people from Anaa island in French Polynesia. He speaks in *Iaai*. While he’s speaking, everybody looks at the ground. He ends with “*oleti*”. The people are still looking at the ground and reply with a group “*oleti*”.

The mayor briefly thanks him for his gesture and passes the gift [a piece of fabric and a bank note] to old Cyriaque without saying anything more. The old man stands up, takes the gift and starts thanking the donor for it. Meanwhile, everyone is quiet and looking down. The old man extends thanks for the gift on behalf of all the councillors, the mayor, the “19 and their families”. Everyone says “*oleti*”.

(Fieldwork diary, 4 October 2010 session)

In situations like this, the gift, a piece of cotton fabric and a bank note, is always presented to the mayor first. However, despite holding the highest office on the island, he was fairly “young”, around 50 years old, and does not belong to a prestigious clan or have a high-ranking position within his clan. Hence, when he is given a customary “gift” during a local council session like the one mentioned above, he does not keep it himself but passes it on to what the customary hierarchy considers a “greater person”, someone older, who then extends thanks for the gift, out loud, on behalf of the members of the local council. In such situations, it is obvious that the customary hierarchy is the norm of reference for everyone, even the “professional politicians”.

Moreover, the language used also changes, and people almost always express thanks for “gifts” presented in such contexts in *Iaai* or *Fagaueva* (depending on the mother tongue of the person doing so). According to the situations, customary norms and habits can also have a certain influence on the way local councils operate as the following situation illustrates.

The role of custom is particularly evident when one looks at what women councillors can and cannot do. One of them talked to me about her role in setting things up for the Festival of Melanesian Arts in October 2010:

C.A.: “The mayor said ‘Christiane you have to do this!’ It’s true that it is my job after all! But it is also true that [...] the people who do the work are older men, so for me [...] We Kanak people are not allowed to speak to an older man, but it’s my job! This is what I have to do”.

M.N.: “So, you’re not allowed to speak to an older man but if you have to do so as a councillor then people tolerate it?”

C.A.: “Precisely”.

M.N.: “But this is hard for you, isn’t it?”

C.A.: “Yes, it is very hard, when I’d finished with the festival, well, I went down there to give them a customary thank you gift, because ... they are older men you know! And I cannot tell them what to do! But it is my responsibility, this is what I have to do. It is my working group’s responsibility! So, when I’d finished with it, well I went to them and apologized. Because when they did the work, I was above them, I was put above them, but when they finished, well, I thanked them. [...] They did everything I asked them to do! At first, they were meant to build big tents. And then, the mayor came to me and said ‘they have to use steel sheets’. Therefore, they used steel sheets. It meant I was bothering them you know. They are older men, remember! But I went to them and apologized, it was to show them that they are a lot more important than me [...] to apologize [...] for having asked them to do this, when they are older men, like fathers you know”.

(Interview with C. A., 11/10/2010, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa)

The woman councillor describes the very difficult position she ended up in before and after the festival, due to her responsibilities as a councillor. On the one hand, as a councillor, she was in charge of supervising tent-building, but, on the other hand, this status put her in a doubly difficult position of domination, being both young and a woman. This situation clearly stems from the specific social relation mechanisms prevailing in daily life, which once more reminds us of what Lagroye (1994, p. 7) has written about the behaviours elected representatives can be led to have: “One social relationship configuration cannot be substituted for another according to a system which seeks to reduce social forms, but [...] progressively, partly, new social relationship systems are appearing and affecting all groups in various ways”.

As a Kanak woman, she says, a woman councillor must not give orders to older men, to people whom the customary hierarchy system considers higher on the social scale. To find a solution to this issue, the woman councillor decided to make a choice, which she elucidates very clearly and which must be stressed since she could also have decided not to do this at all: to do what she had to as a councillor even if this led to a difficult position for a Kanak woman but, once the work was done, to go to these older men and apologise for giving them tasks. This woman councillor’s behaviour clearly echoes with Lagroye’s argument regarding new the emergence of new relationship systems that, amongst other things, can include multimodal ways of addressing to one another depending on which social position is considered (Lagroye 1994, p. 13).

By apologizing, the women councillor tells the older men she is well aware of the customary hierarchy, especially in regard to those who are “above her”. This case is a typical example of the real difficulties that women councillors have to face when forced to deal with two different social statuses. This situation is also obvious during local council sessions:

C.A.: “Personally, I do try to motivate them! [women who attempt to speak out during meetings]. I tell them that men always being above us in the hierarchy is not a good thing! We women also have to be as high as them, both men and women, or even higher than them, we might as well [she laughs]. But at the same time, we have to remember that, we are women! So, in order to speak out, I believe that...when I speak out during meetings, I know it’s good when there are only women ... only women. But when men are there too, that’s when I...” [silence]

M.N.: “When there are men, is it harder?”

C.A.: “It’s not harder, but there are men I mean, and I am way lower than them. The mayor, I respect him. But he’s lower than my husband even! But I respect him, because, he holds the highest public office (position?) on the island”.

(Interview with C. A., le 11-10-2010, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa)

As we can see once again, seniority and the male/female hierarchy both have a very big influence on the practices in council sessions and on the job of “local councillor”. Within this job, these two hierarchies thus apply: “There is no doubt that being a local councillor, is first modelled by the configuration of specific social relations in a certain place, at a certain time. The ways a mayor acts, as ‘part of an elite’, ‘an entrepreneur’, are the result of the dominant social relations system of his society, of conceptions of what is legitimate and required, and of socially valorized practices in all their forms” (Lagroye 1994, p. 6–7).

We now understand that in spite of exhibiting norms (fast decision-making, interrupting people etc.) that we never see anywhere on the island, or in Kanak New Caledonia in general, local council sessions do not ignore social obligations that apply in everyone’s ordinary daily life and are dictated by the ideology of custom. Indeed, these appear to be the basis of the power relationships and interests characterizing this new political arena being formed in the context of the local council institutions and by the practices of the elected representatives, the councillors. As Lagroye (1994, p. 8) writes concerning their behavior:

“We are therefore looking at a real sedimentation mechanism, through which role prescriptions matching successively both social relations and knowledge systems coexist, one characteristic of a politician’s job being the management of these co-existing systems on a day-to-day basis”.

And, it is precisely this sedimentation mechanism that ends up empowering the mayor and gains him special respect even during customary events:

M. T.: “Personally, I would say that yes, it makes a difference being the mayor. It changes things. Yes. People see you differently. In the end, they look at you differently because you are the

mayor of the island. He is in charge of the whole population. I mainly notice that coming from older people, I can feel the respect owed to the person holding the highest public office”.

M. N.: “How would you say they express this respect? [...]”

M.T.: “They call me Mr Mayor ... yup ... when younger people, people my age, well, they call me by my first name!”

(Interview with M. Tillewa, mayor of Ouvéa, 22/10/2010, Hwadrilla, Ouvéa.)

In other words, in spite of custom being unanimously considered the foundation of both the social and political life of Ouvéa and in spite of achieving independence for New Caledonia being a goal for an extremely large majority of people on the island, this does not preclude continued recognition of republican institutions and of the state more generally. This paradox reminds us of the argument of Bazin who considered that “State machinery is a trap in which everyone gets caught without understanding how it happened” (Bazin 1988, p. 711). This also introduces new questions, this time regarding the presence of pro-independence elected representatives within republican institutions and what Jean-Marie Tjibaou used to call “decolonisation within the Republic” (Tjibaou in Wittersheim 2003, p. 19).

16.6 Pro-Independence Elected Representatives and Decolonisation

Concerning the “State machinery” project (Bazin 1988, p. 711) in New Caledonia, Wittersheim (2006, p. 128–129) notes: “Yes, State projects of all sorts, are necessarily confronted with local and regional powers but in the case of Kanak New Caledonia, the idea of a Melanesian independent state itself is still only a young ideology, and social strategies find their roots in customary political systems”. In saying so, Wittersheim points out that regarding New Caledonia, any political issue is, at least partially, ruled by custom and more specifically, its political system from which emerge specific social strategies.

The local council of Ouvéa is therefore a typical case study of the implementation of the “social strategies” quoted above from Wittersheim’s work. It would seem that we are currently witnessing, at the heart of this republican institution, the local council, the ongoing process of the construction of a Kanak political arena, which oscillates between customary rules on the one hand and republican protocols on the other. Since New Caledonia is not yet fully decolonised, the importance of this political arena needs to be stressed. Indeed, Republican institutions have proved to be the main place for Kanak people to express their political demands more recently along with international opportunities such as the United Nations (Demmer 2007; Fischer 2013, 2019; Forrest and Kowasch 2016):

Since French people became citizens in 1946 and able to vote in 1951, they have only been given the chance to express their opinion (pro-independence, pro-autonomy, or other) within republican institutions (municipalities, territorial assembly, provinces) which set a frame for French politics in an arena that makes the expression of a native nationalism very hard (Wittersheim 2006, p. 114).

As mentioned earlier, the Kanak entered republican institutions via the missions, before turning their back on these institutions and protesting against them during the 1970s and 1980s. Since the Matignon Accords were signed in 1988, pro-independence Kanak activists have decided in favour of “decolonisation within the Republic”, which has led them to once more become involved in republican institutions in order to change things from the inside. This echoes the work of Lefebvre on socialist politicians at the start of the twentieth century and that of Mischi, who focused on communist politicians (Lefebvre 2004; Mischi 2002). Both authors explored, for each of the political parties studied, the presence of revolutionaries within republican institutions and their ability (or inability) to subvert the institution from within. Their analyses tend to prove that in the end it is the institution, due precisely to the fact that it is an institution, which ultimately subverts the revolutionaries. In New Caledonia, the political strategies aimed at building an independent state using French republican institutions to do so is still the current general strategy of most pro-independence Kanak (Tjibaou, 1996). Not surprisingly, this remains a significant challenge. To what extent can Kanak customary norms prevail when acting within an institution which, as shown here, is organised around different hierarchies and norms?

16.7 Conclusion

This study of Ouvéa local council, a Republican institution imported directly from France, shows that two forms of organisation and exercise of local power are embedded within one another. In his work on Kone in the north of Grande Terre, Trépiéd (2007) demonstrated that, after the end of the Native Regulations, the first Kanak elected representatives all belonged to prestigious clans and most of them were chiefs. After the 1960s, however, this recruiting logic disappeared and was replaced by another one still in use today based on the possession of academic, intellectual and economic capital (*ibid*). The sessions of the Ouvéa local council and the political character of the mayor both show that the current situation in Ouvéa remains very much the same. For the mayor between 2008 and 2014, like both his predecessor and successor,⁸ had a university education and a long-term job with considerable responsibilities.

⁸B. Hounou, who was mayor between 2002 and 2008, was re-elected in 2014.

Moreover, during the sessions, the influence of protocol generates “behaviour repertoires” (Lagroye 1994, p. 7), which are not observable anywhere else on the island and are instead those of professional politicians. This analytic category leads us to operate a distinction between “professional politicians” and “ordinary local councilors”. If both are still expected to respond to customary norms in certain customary contexts, customary norms and logics seem to be of greater importance for so-called “ordinary local councillors” than any others. Questioning the embedding of these two logics within the same “place of politics” leads us to the idea of the ongoing construction process of an autonomous political arena. This process, on which local councillors work day after day, is in that sense far from being just an extension of custom. As I have tried to demonstrate, it can generate specific practices and behaviours in that political arena.

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