



Introduction: Geographical Understanding and “Listening” in New Caledonia-Kanaky

1

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Abstract

This chapter is an introduction to “Geographies of New Caledonia-Kanaky”, edited by Matthias Kowasch and Simon Batterbury. The archipelago is a “biodiversity hotspot” with high species endemism, ultramafic soils and nickel resources that have been mined extensively for nearly 150 years. It remains a territory of France, and after three referendums on independence, decolonisation is an unfinished and ongoing process that still divides communities in their interpretation of history and their aspirations for the future. The 21 chapters of the book, including this introduction and the conclusion, reflect different themes and offer cultural, political, social and ecological perspectives. New Caledonia-Kanaky (NC-K) is a “window on the world” in terms of decolonisation paths, environmental and social justice, racial inequality, biodiversity and the impacts of mining. The book has seven parts: (1) biodiversity, environmental protection and policies; (2) fisheries and agriculture; (3) extractive industries, mining development and waste management; (4) land reform and urban development; (5) cultural heritage, languages and education; (6) small-scale politics and gender questions; and lastly (7) decolonisation and political independence.

Keywords

Biodiversity hotspot · Nickel sector · Decolonisation · Indigenous Kanak scholars · Scalar geographies · Common destiny

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1.1 Introduction

This book offers a geographical perspective on one of the most fascinating places on the planet – the Pacific archipelago and territory of New Caledonia-Kanaky (*la Nouvelle-Calédonie* in French). The archipelago is located in the southwest Pacific Ocean about 1200 km east of Australia and about 540 km south of Vanuatu. New Caledonia-Kanaky (NC-K) has a land area of 18,576 km² and is politically divided into three provinces (North, South and Loyalty Islands).

We have edited this collection for an English-speaking audience, working over several years to solicit, write and sometimes translate the chapters. The islands that make up the territory are still little known to Anglophone scholars and students. Their history of settlement is shared with neighbouring island chains, being part of the migration and diffusion of Melanesian peoples over millennia. The precise origin and itinerary of the first settlers are debated, but archaeological studies pin the arrival of humanity around 3500 mya (Sand 2010). The archipelago was the scene of European trading and sandalwood exploitation by the 1800s and was officially colonised by France in 1853, under Napoleon III. What those settlers found was a large Pacific archipelago, including the New Caledonian main island Grande Terre populated by Kanak clans and the Loyalty Islands chain inhabited by Kanak and Tavu'avua' peoples (see Fig. 1.1).

Geographical research on New Caledonia-Kanaky is dominated by discussion of three phenomena. Firstly, its extraordinary marine and terrestrial biodiversity has a high percentage of endemic species, unique ultramafic soils and extensive fringing reefs surrounded by an extensive marine territory. There were no land mammals remaining in immediate precolonial times other than a flying fox (*Pteropus vetulus*) and bats. While there is an endangered virtually flightless bird, the Cagou (*Rhynochetos jubatus*), larger ones (e.g. *Sylviornis neocaledoniae*) had already been hunted to

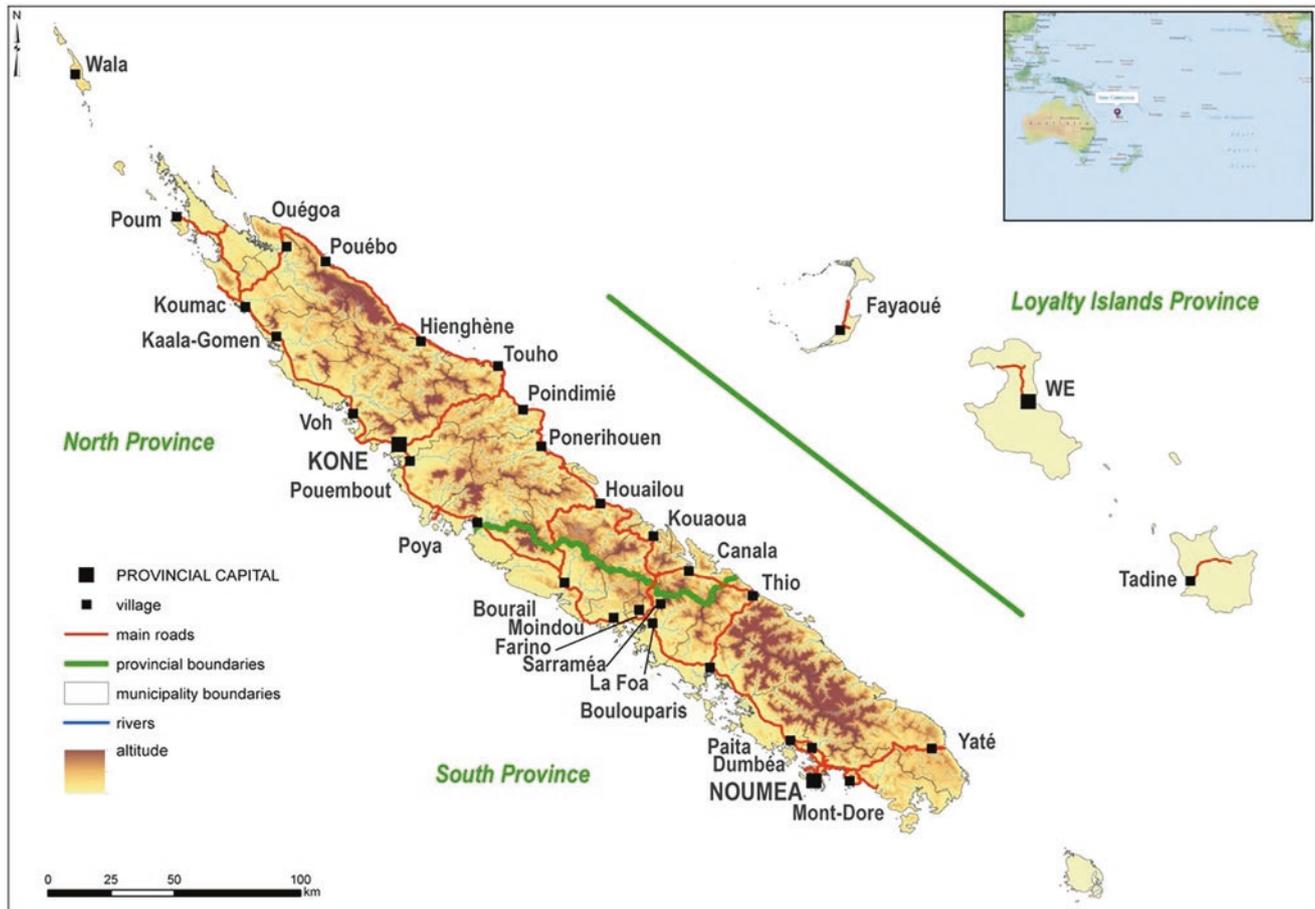


Fig. 1.1 Provinces and municipalities in New Caledonia-Kanaky. (Source: <https://georep.nc/>. Cartography: Arroyas 2023)

extinction before European arrival (Kier et al. 2009, p. 9325; Jaffre et al. 1997). In recent years, documentation of this “biodiversity hotspot” with its Gondwanan relicts has turned towards concern over species loss and the effects of marine and terrestrial climatic change. There has also been greater recognition of the deleterious impacts of nickel mining, by far the most important industry and source of income on the islands.

Secondly, the economy is highly dependent on mining, impacting other sectors such as road infrastructure, hospitality and construction. The main island Grande Terre possesses around 25% of worldwide nickel reserves, discovered in the nineteenth century by the French engineer Jules Garnier (Batterbury et al. 2020). While the nickel sector contributes to 10–20% of local GDP (depending on the global demand on nickel), the sector contributes over 90% to the country’s export value. The Kanak independence movement wants to use the nickel sector as an instrument for economic emancipation and future political independence. The Koniambo mine and smelter in the Kanak-dominated North Province were developed for this purpose, thanks to a 51/49% shareholding model with a multinational mining company

(Falconbridge, which was later acquired by Xstrata, then Glencore) (Pitoiset 2015; Kowasch 2018). While this arrangement ended in 2024, the extractive industries and decolonisation are deeply connected.

Thirdly, decolonisation is an unfinished and ongoing process: contentious and divided in many ways, in terms of people’s interpretation of history and aspirations for the future of the territory. New Caledonia-Kanaky is one out of 17 countries on the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, defined by the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation (C-24) as “territories whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government” (UN 2021). Since the Maignon Accords in 1988 and the Nouméa Accord in 1998, however, the territory has for the most part embraced an ongoing process of decolonisation, the term used in the Nouméa Accord (Gagné 2015). There have been three referendums on political independence from France since 2018. Critical scholars (see Belhôte and Merle 2022; Kowasch et al. 2022; Trépiéd 2021) consider the third to have been undemocratic and wasted. A series of events in late 2021, including a fierce outbreak of the COVID virus especially in Kanak communities, led independence leaders to call for

“non-participation” by their supporters, overwhelmingly Kanak. Despite the request for postponement, the French government stubbornly stuck to the initial date on 12 December 2021 for the third and final referendum. In an interview in December 2021, Jean-Francois Merle, the advisor to former Prime Minister Michel Rocard, said that it was never a strength of France to invent new “soft” partnerships and collaboration with former colonies. “I own, or I do not own”, is the underlying political principle (Kowasch et al. 2022). Currently, the territory is still “owned”, and as a result, the politically charged and unresolved negotiations have continued into 2024 about how, and to what extent, decolonisation will take place. President Macron’s visit to New Caledonia-Kanaky in July 2023 was followed by documents confirming France’s intention to remain a significant force in the Pacific. Challenging supporters of independence, his government now wishes to replace the Nouméa Accord, allow French citizens that have resided in the archipelago for only 10 years voting rights, and set back the independence cause, potentially for generations.

The events of 2021 left New Caledonia-Kanaky in an unusual and even unique position. The struggles of Indigenous people in the French overseas territories in the Pacific also differ from those of other groups, for example, the Inuit of the Americas or Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In contrast to Aboriginal and Māori leaders, Pacific Islanders from the French territories came late and only irregularly to the UN meetings about Indigenous rights (Gagné 2015). Their struggle is little known and understood in the Anglophone world even though they constitute over 41% of the population of NC-K, along with tens of thousands of other Pacific islanders who also reside there. In this book, several chapters address the complex history of stalled decolonisation of NC-K and how this relates to aspects of everyday life including land tenure, housing, cultural heritage and education.

New Caledonia-Kanaky is located in a region, Oceania, where China is investing heavily and trading with neighbouring countries. This has often been used to justify the continued French presence as a Western, largely non-aggressive buffer to Chinese expansionism (Kowasch et al. 2022). There are of course other geopolitical reasons for France to keep its overseas territories and to rebuff decolonisation requests. Imperialistic aspirations, cultural hegemony and abundant natural resources stand out. Extensive and globally significant nickel reserves on Grande Terre mean it is sometimes called the “nickel island”, while biodiversity and high species endemism are also notable. The archipelago has more than a hundred years of nickel extraction remaining. Kanak people were for a long time marginalised in this industry controlled by French corporate interests, particularly by the company SLN (Société Le Nickel). There was limited employment for them in mines and at the Doniambo smelter

in Nouméa. Only recently have Kanak begun to develop sub-contracting operations, and they have participated in large-scale mining with the Koniambo project since the beginning of the 2000s (Kowasch 2010; Rosner 2018). As of early 2024, the shared ownership agreement of Koniambo was ended by the main investor, Glencore, which decided to sell its stake, leading to a transitional period. In addition to its nickel resources, NC-K has an EEZ (exclusive economic zone) of 1,740,000 km² including major maritime assets: fish, the biological diversity of reef ecologies, seabed minerals and deep-water oil and gas reserves (MacLellan 2017). The potential resources in the EEZ are desired by French interests, as France competes for power and recognition on the international stage.

For the Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), the term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, “it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, p. 1). In this book, however, we have tried to integrate Indigenous perspectives into the research content, and to engage scholars of different backgrounds, all of whom support cross-cultural exchanges and knowledge-building. Among them are four Indigenous Kanak scholars, knowledge holders and activists (Eddie Wayuone Wadrawane from the island of Maré, Antoine Cano Poady from the community of Baco in the North, Chanel Ouetcho from the community of Touaourou in the South and Jean-Michel Guiart who has Kanak heritage). They have contributed chapters on Indigenous knowledge and education, on cultural heritage and on decolonisation and the principle of “common destiny”. These chapters not only deal with scientific knowledge and concepts but also address activist issues and Kanak cultural knowledge, such as music and toponyms.

To value various perspectives on the country (or territory), and to honour the Indigenous lands that contributors deal with in different ways (political, social-economic, ecological, historical, spatial), we use the term “New Caledonia-Kanaky” in the title of the book and in some chapters but according to author preferences. New Caledonia is the official name, dating back to James Cook and his crew who named it in 1774 only because the mountainous scenery of the main island reminded Cook of his native Scotland. But the name has endured right through the colonial period. For most Indigenous Kanak peoples, the country is called “Kanaky”. The Nouméa Accord, signed in 1998 and which President Macron of France wishes to extinguish and replace in 2024, provided new symbolic national “markers” comprising a flag, a country name, banknotes, a slogan and an anthem. Similar to what occurred in Papua New Guinea, the future name could be agreed on to be New Caledonia-Kanaky or Kanaky-New Caledonia, as employed by the former French overseas minister Victorin Lurel in 2012 and by some

(French) scholars (e.g. Leblic and Cugola 2018) – but there is no official decision yet on this. In addition, because of its history of settlement, there are still customary and European models of land tenure that have run in parallel for almost 170 years. Sourisseau et al. (2010) call this a unique form of “historic dualism”. Kanak communities living on customary land called “tribu” in French (“tribe” in American English) can comprise one or several clans. However, we prefer to use the term “community” in this book, because first, North American tribes are quite different to those in New Caledonia-Kanaky (and we want to avoid misinterpretations), and second, we think that the term “community” better translates – in English – to the structural organisation of several Kanak clans in a social entity. However, it is not used this way in francophone ex-colonies in Africa.

1.2 Book Contents

The 21 chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion, reflect the great diversity of the country, from a cultural but also a political, social and ecological perspective. They draw on, and provide examples of, a large variety of concepts such as biodiversity, decolonisation (Batterbury et al. 2020; Mohamed-Gaillard 2020), environmental justice (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020), inclusive development (Raworth 2017), locally driven development on customary land (Scheyvens et al. 2020) and feminism and women’s rights activism (e.g. Douglas 2003; Trask 1996). The book has seven parts: (1) biodiversity, environmental protection and policies; (2) fisheries and agriculture; (3) extractive industries, mining development and waste management; (4) land reform and urban development; (5) cultural heritage, languages and education; (6) small-scale politics and gender questions; and lastly, (7) decolonisation and political independence.

Part I of this book includes three chapters, environmental protection and terrestrial and marine biodiversity. As we have outlined, New Caledonia-Kanaky has the world’s highest plant endemism richness by several measures (Kier et al. 2009) and is considered to be a biodiversity hotspot (Pouteau and Birnbaum 2016). The archipelago’s lagoons were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 because of the great diversity of coral reefs and associated ecosystems that they offer, and because of their sheer scale.

After this introduction, Rodary introduces environmental policies in NC-K and argues that ecological rationality, doing the right thing for ecosystems, the atmosphere and the oceans, cannot be dissociated from political rationality, which means that certain scales of environmental governance are privileged. The treatment of the archipelago’s environmental issues is heavily dependent on the political strategies and tactics of various New Caledonian actors at

different scales (municipal, provincial, New Caledonian, Oceanian and French). Chapter 3 authored by Isnard and Jaffré explores characteristics of New Caledonian plant biodiversity and draws a picture of the major unique elements of its flora. The authors highlight that to protect plant diversity, more ambitious aims are needed including habitat protection, supporting plant populations (not just rare species) and being mindful of genetic diversity. Pelletier explores ocean biodiversity in the fourth chapter, across NC-K’s large marine EEZ that includes outlying atolls and remote reef systems in the Coral Sea. She details the particular features and the iconic species that distinguish this part of the South Pacific and the inevitable anthropogenic pressures on oceanic and coastal habitats. While reef and coastal environments remain in better health than many of their neighbours, the threats posed to them are real.

Part II of the book deals with fisheries and agriculture. The FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) declared the period 2019–2028 to be the Decade of Family Farming. Georgeou et al. (2022) note that around 80% of all Pacific Islanders still rely on agricultural produce from their own gardens or from other smallholders to support or to supplement their diets. Family and smallholder farming, but also fishing, make an important contribution to food security as many scholars have noted in previous stocktaking exercises and research projects (Connell and Waddell 2006). For example, the interdisciplinary FALAH project (2021–2025), funded by the EU Horizon 2020 RISE programme and led by the University of New Caledonia (UNC), is building a network of research teams operating in the Pacific Islands that have a common interest in family farming and food security and its direct or indirect relationship with the environment, health and nutrition.

In this part, two chapters deal with family farming and fishing practices. First, Sabinot et al. discuss the role of fishing in the livelihood activities of New Caledonians, independently of their social status, and examine the different purposes for which fishing is practised. During their fieldwork, the authors from IRD (Institute of Research for Development) and IAC, both based in New Caledonia-Kanaky, were often told that a good fisher is “responsible” and “respectful”. The fisher’s social function is essential to societal well-being. There have been some efforts to preserve resources and to assist fishers. The authors thus argue that in the face of worldwide over-exploitation of marine resources, small-scale fisheries have to be given more priority, which means enhancing the knowledge systems on which they are based, and their practices. Second, Bouard et al. examine the main transformations that have marked Kanak family farming and describe the ways in which monetisation and globalisation have influenced Kanak custom. They conclude that Kanak domestic groups continue to undertake agricultural, hunting and fishing activities, although some members leave

to work outside the community. Based on a large quantitative survey of Kanak households, driven by IAC (New Caledonian Institute of Agronomy) in 2010, and other data, the authors show that monetary wages are not systematically reinvested in agriculture and especially not in the purchase of equipment.

The nickel sector plays a key role in the New Caledonian economy. This makes it unique among the Pacific islands and subject to important distortions and influence from global metal markets. Part III of the volume including three chapters dealing with nickel exploitation and processing, which dates back well over a century, environmental policies in the nickel sector, mining nationalism, and waste management.

Nickel mining leads to heavy environmental impacts and creates tonnes of mining waste, so-called mine tailings. Waste management can be a great challenge for small island countries (Manglou et al. 2022). The chapter by Pestaña et al. addresses mining waste but importantly, broader waste management strategies in NC-K, framed in the context of island waste problems. The largely urban population generates metropolitan waste similar to Western cities, and there is a lack of consistency at all governance levels in the way it is handled and treated. The vast majority of waste generated is sent to landfills, and particularly in rural areas, some ends up in open dumping sites. Better recycling is part of the solution, but a general aim should be to minimise the waste stream and establish ethical and innovative management.

Chapter 8 analyses environmental policies and conflicts between companies and local associations/communities. Many scholars have shown that large-scale mining leads to extensive environmental damage, social upheavals and widening economic disparities (Bebbington et al. 2018; Dunlap 2019). Kowasch and Merlin explore how two mining projects in New Caledonia-Kanaky (Goro Nickel in the South and Koniambo in the North) define the links between their environmental impacts, their responsibilities and their political and democratic concerns. Based on the analysis of environmental justice and conflict (Le Billon 2015; Schlosberg 2004), the authors show that the legitimacy of environmental associations and committees negotiating with mining companies is always fluid. Environmental management can be differently addressed and is often intermingled with social and political claims for benefit-sharing and legitimacy, especially in the context of decolonisation and in negotiations with profit-driven entities. In the ninth chapter, Demmer analyses the (unfinished) decolonisation process through the prism of the nickel sector. To promote economic development and emancipation, the Kanak independence party FLNKS have been relatively successful in nickel mining and processing until a recent fall in prices. This chapter provides some insights on the internal arguments and struggles concerning the right strategy to insure benefit from nickel resources.

For the largest population group, the Kanak, land is crucial for their identity. The former Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou highlighted that land is more than material wealth or property: “A clan, which loses its land, loses its personality” (Tjibaou and Missotte 1976 p. 60). Part IV of this book deals with land issues and urban development.

Chapter 10, authored by Batterbury, Kowasch and Arroyas – the latter working at ADRAF, the New Caledonian agency in charge of land reform dating back to the 1970s – describes the history of re-allocating and restituting land to the descendants of its earliest inhabitants. Based on two case studies (Poum and Baco, both located in the North Province), the authors investigate the question of recognising land legitimacy without land allocation, a variety of land conflict issues and the assessment of socio-economic development on customary land. They conclude that an individualised profit-oriented neoliberal paradigm and a collective more “inclusive” economy approach overlap on customary land in NC-K. Next, economic development in the North Province (anchored by the Koniambo mining project) is a core element of the politics of rebalancing, initiated with the Matignin-Oudinot Accords in 1988. Economic and financial power is concentrated in the capital Nouméa and its neighbouring municipalities (Dumbéa, Païta and Mont-Dore) forming the Greater Nouméa agglomeration – where 67% of the total population of NC-K live (and around 65% of jobs are located in the South Province) (see Fig. 1.1). Rebalancing politics aim to promote “development” in the Kanak-dominated North of Grande Terre by creating infrastructures and jobs. The geographer Pantz analyses – from a spatial perspective – the ethnic redistribution that accompanies the urban expansion of the capital Nouméa, which has for a long time been entitled “Nouméa, the white”. He argues in Chap. 11 that the persistence of spatial, social and political inequalities and marginalisation raises the question of the true place of Kanak people in Nouméa today.

Part V of this volume addresses cultural heritage, languages and education, in three chapters. The chapter by Indigenous Kanak knowledge holders Poady (community of Baco) and Ouetcho (community of Touaourou), and by Stastny and Kowasch, highlights Kanak cultural heritage including toponyms, social mapping and Kaneka music. The authors demonstrate that in a context of colonial legacies, institutional conservatism and depleting natural resources, the initiatives undertaken by Kanak people at the grassroots level are key to the continuance of Kanak cultural heritage and practices. The cultural work and artistic engagement of clans, associations and individuals create opportunities for Kanak people that are otherwise not, or are inadequately, provided by (public) institutions. The Kaneka band “Humaa-gué” are valuing Kanak cultures and heritage by addressing a large diversity of topics such as village-level cultural practices, colonial history, Kanak independence struggles and the mining industry. Another important aspect of cultural heritage

are Kanak languages, discussed in the following chapter authored by Leblic. The French anthropologist offers an overview of Kanak languages and shows that they persist, although their speakers have been displaced over long periods. Kanak people have taken an interest in language protection, supported by the Academy of Kanak languages and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre. Chapter 14, authored by the Kanak educational scientist Eddie Wayuone Wadrawane, deals with Kanak knowledge in formal education. Wadrawane asks how fundamental elements of Kanak culture can be integrated into schooling, with opportunities to develop innovation in teaching techniques and teacher training. He argues “Educational institutions in New Caledonia have for too long been an authority preoccupied with preparing and producing its own heirs” and “Schools tend to distance Kanak pupils from their culture and way of life”.

Part VI contains two chapters dealing with localised political arenas and the evolution of feminist and gender politics. Kerryn Baker describes the tensions between France’s democratic support of equal rights and parity between men and women in political bodies, and the historically patriarchal traditions of Kanak society. Notably, the Kanak writer and politician Déwé Gorodey (1949–2022) fought for women’s rights, as well as Kanak identity and independence, but male-dominated Kanak bodies strongly resisted French parity laws until 2004. While close to half the seats in the Congress and the Provincial assemblies are now held by women, this is not the case in the Customary Senate or in the Parliament (Wadrawane et al. 2023). Nayral analyses the hybridisation of political power on Ouvéa island in the Loyalty Islands Province (Fig. 1.1), through the actions of a local council that challenges French political norms while still existing within the French Republic.

Part VII turns to the third major theme we identified above, the “unfinished and ongoing process” of decolonisation. This is the focus of Gagné’s chapter on self-determination and the use of Indigenous identity, revealing New Caledonia-Kanaky as unique in the francophone Pacific. So much has been written about the unfolding of the 2018–2021 referendums on independence that it is important to keep an accurate tally of the currents of political debate and actions and the intentions behind them. This is provided by Denise Fisher, former Australian consul in Nouméa. After explaining the referendum processes, she questions the finality of the third referendum, given that such a large percentage of the population consider it illegitimate, as did we (Kowasch et al. 2022). In chapter 19, Jean-Michel Guiart offers a critical perspective on the struggle for independence, questioning not only the motivations of the key actors but also their oft-repeated mantra of seeking a “common destiny”. While this term drove several legitimate and long-lasting efforts to set aside the binary divide that has plagued the colonial period, he argues it is “hard to see in material

and practical terms”. “Common destiny” is a dream without substance, insofar as it does not identify any concrete project or real political will other than the continued benevolence of France. Inequality has a major racial dimension, with Kanak ethno-nationalism on the one hand and French ethno-nationalism on the other. But he argues the racialisation of the New Caledonian political debate sees both sides subjugated, in the name of globalisation, to neo-liberalism. In other words, the historical disadvantage of Kanak people remains largely intact, and the whole territory is no closer to a commonality of intent after decades of struggle and deliberation on matters of governance. He proposes, following Foucault, that the future lies in addressing inequality, leaning towards some form of heterotopia, or “worlds within worlds” in which individual cultures can still thrive, but with social and economic justice. It is not a question of overthrowing the oppressor, he argues, but of escaping domination by destroying the system that alienates. For Scott Robertson in his chapter, the French “citizenship ideal” has not worked in New Caledonia-Kanaky, challenged by the persistent disagreements and inequality that Guiart identifies.

1.3 Discussion

This book is the result of collective effort, across cultures and spanning the globe. However, no volume of this type can be a complete geographical account, since geographies are constantly being rewritten by the flux in geopolitical relations affecting the archipelago, the turbulent political debate around independence and changing economic fortunes with overwhelming reliance on a single mineral export that changes in value, affecting labour markets and the natural environment.

We recognise that even with 21 chapters we could not cover every topic. The book does not have a lengthy discussion of climate change, past and present, but this is referenced in several IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports and other studies (Dutheil et al. 2021). Dutheil et al. estimate that the islands will see an 18% decrease in annual mean rainfall by 2080–2100, due to changing atmospheric circulation, experienced particularly during the summer hot season. They show that this is because of “strong anti-cyclonic and air subsidence anomalies centred on the north of New Caledonia, which reduces moisture convergence over the archipelago” (Dutheil et al. 2021, p. 87). The effects including more bushfires will fall on water resources and terrestrial ecosystems. In addition, New Caledonia-Kanaky is occasionally in the path of cyclones, which are increasingly felt outside the normal cyclone seasons, affecting perceptions of risk and vulnerability. We have omitted discussion of Pacific development aid programmes, because NC-K is in a rather unique situation given its fiscal

and administrative links to France, from which it receives financial transfers, and it is therefore part of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). By contrast, it receives little support from international NGOs and multilateral agencies. It is not part of the European Union, and funding has diminished for the OCTs (EU Overseas Countries or Territories). Its aid flows are not reported by the World Bank after 2004. Nonetheless, individual programmes do operate, many of them registered as local associations and membership organisations, notably in social support programmes, healthcare and nature conservation.

The classic concept of scalar geographies is very relevant in New Caledonia-Kanaky, given its enmeshment in global assemblages of cultures and trade that are organised hierarchically (Green 2016). It is well understood that “socio-spatial processes change the importance and role of certain geographical scales” (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003, p. 913). The French Pacific dependencies are subject to distant sites of power, to which they are beholden, but to which they also contribute through flows of materials, people, culture and knowledge. Scalar interlinkages are complex.

The local scale was impacted by the socio-spatial nature of pre-colonial clan histories of settlement and movements, as they traced itineraries across the islands. Talking with elders in September 2022 and August 2023, we were struck how memories of these histories are still strong. European settlement, the radiation of settlement from Nouméa, land spoliation and the creation of “tribal reserves” for Kanak people all disturbed the lifeways and social relationships of the first inhabitants, later leading to significant land access problems and land tenure conflicts.

At the regional or “island” scale, the creation of three provinces by the Matignon-Oudinot Accords (1988) in the wake of the 1980s civil war was significant, because it gave more administrative and some political autonomy. This is the scale at which biophysical and political connections and disconnections have emerged. New Caledonia-Kanaky exhibits significant urban primacy, and on Grande Terre, there are still significant clashes between the aims of capitalist mining firms and environmental policies and nature conservation efforts. The efforts by the North Province to establish a new urban growth pole anchored by the Koniambo mine are also significant (including shopping malls, rental housing, leisure facilities, filling stations, etc.). Nevertheless, the demographic and economic dominance of the capital Nouméa in the South remains.

The EEZ, but also the establishment of the UNESCO World Heritage Site (in 2008) and of the Natural Park of the Coral Sea (in 2014), extends the island space into marine territory, although so far without adequate resources or political will for management and regulation, as Pelletier’s chapter illustrates. However, the marine space represents an opportu-

nity for NC-K and France for economic development on the national and also the international stage. Some improvements in marine protection were approved in 2023.

The Pacific region is increasingly significant in world affairs given its geopolitical importance, particularly for Chinese influence and because of its enduring colonial links (Kowasch et al. 2022; Strating et al. 2022). The relationship with France and other countries is playing out, for example, in a dispute over the EEZ borders with Vanuatu, and France’s relatively new Pacific Islands Forum membership. In 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron was promoting an Indo-Pacific vision, but independence supporters in NC-K feel little affinity for it. Other issues, like oceanic plastic waste, have a cross-Pacific dimension (Fuller et al. 2022; Manglou et al. 2022). The colonial relationship, some of the movement of minerals and the geopolitical standoff between the major powers operating across the Pacific have all been formed at the global level, given (in particular) the extreme distances between France and NC-K. NC-K’s bargaining position in the United Nations is tricky, since France is a full member, and President Macron and his predecessors have done nothing to advance independence, despite Macron highlighting that colonisation was a crime against humanity, in a speech in Algeria in 2017 (Le Monde 2017). His position has since hardened (NC 1ère 2023). It is worth remembering – and this is not always evident when focussing on the mine sites, huge trucks, and wharfs on Grande Terre – that the market for nickel, the prime export, is global. The recent arrival of Tesla as an important buyer reinforces this, as does the fall in nickel prices of 2023 and 2024.

1.4 Conclusion

A scalar political ecology (Green 2016) of Pacific issues is fundamentally geographical in scope and ambition. Space is socially constructed. Scalar relationships interrelate and imbricate over time. We cannot understand social, political, economic and environmental transformations on “connected” islands like these without reference to the “higher-order” processes that led to transformations of land use, settlement and social change (Connell and Waddell 2006).

While this is a fundamental geographical observation, there is also an emerging sociospatial agenda for change here. It is guided by an ethical position expressed in different ways in this book: self-determination and tolerance rather than overdetermination by lucrative extractivist forces and by a geopolitical agenda forged largely in Europe. Addressing inequalities across gender, race and class and recognizing that the unique island endemism and species diversity on land and at sea matter, as do lowering CO₂ emissions and managing pollution and waste. The words of Ojeda et al. (2022) provide guidance. They argue for a “common connection to

each other while feeding from our separate roots”. This means simultaneously “acknowledging where we come from, while climbing out of our differences into shared listening” (Ojeda et al. 2022, p. 160). For this, “we all need to be on the same side despite our differences and partial knowledges. We do not have time, life, or energy to spend fighting each other anymore. We have to listen” (ibid, p. 162). Over the years, similar sentiments have been expressed in NC-K, for example, by the current president of the New Caledonian government, Louis Mapou (Confavreux 2020).

The comedic movie “The Rob Mission” (dir. Chevrin 2021) introduced a lighter note into a fraught period of political and economic uncertainty. Two astronauts, Kanak and Caldoche,¹ are a few minutes out from preparing to shake hands for the cameras as they circle over the territory on a satellite that will, among other things, produce imagery capable of identifying every last gram of exploitable Caledonian nickel. But arguments about symbolism, flags, the length of traditional greetings and food choices rapidly dissolve their partnership, derailing their mission and placing it in extreme peril. The short film plays on racial international stereotypes – “France will pay”, one says, as their bickering breaks the satellite, and things do not end well despite a last-minute effort to bury their differences and save the mission and themselves. A self-serving French politician back on Grande Terre hopes the live broadcast of “friendship” will give a “future together” (common destiny) message on screen, but he just annoys both astronauts. Like the movie, this book exposes some of the reasons that “listening” in NC-K has been so hard since the 1800s but also some of the issues around which it has occurred, or still must happen. New Caledonia-Kanaky is a window on the world. It deserves much more attention. We all need to focus on “conversations and actions across lines of difference to address shared interests in a world where many worlds are possible and where living worlds are recognized, respected, and valued for themselves and for serving as the basis for flourishing human communities” (Ojeda et al. 2022, p. 163).

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¹NC-K-born inhabitants with French origins, descended from those who immigrated during the colonial period.

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