

Shifting trends of rural development in New Caledonia: from the political economy of agricultural sector to environmental politicisation.

**Paper presented at the XI International Rural Sociology
Congress – 24-31 August 2004, Trondheim (Norway).**

Marcel Djama
CIRAD-TERA

Abstract.

New Caledonia is a French territory in the Pacific that has embarked on a de-colonisation process. Over the past two decades, New Caledonia has been implementing – with financial support from France – an important agricultural programme with a focus on modernising farms and boosting production with a view to conquering the domestic market.

In this regard, the country drew on a high-level scientific, technological and administrative training mechanism designed for farmers.

For some years, and partly due to the limitations of this productivist policy, the paradigms of agricultural development are being called into question concurrently with the emergence of environmental issues that tuned into the local and international stakes. These challenges are resulting, among other trends, in the recognition of farming practices discredited until then by the “modernist” standards. However, they are also finding expression in a reconfiguration of research programmes in support of development, and in the emergence of environmental protection NGOs as new agents of development.

This paper examines the conditions that paved the way for these new ecological concerns and the forms of their integration in the rural development strategies and in the local political arena.

Résumé.

La Nouvelle-Calédonie est un territoire français du Pacifique engagé dans un processus de décolonisation. Au cours des deux décennies passées, la Nouvelle-Calédonie a mis en œuvre – avec les moyens financiers de l'Etat français – un important programme de développement de l'agriculture, principalement axé sur la modernisation des exploitations agricoles et la relance de la production pour la conquête du marché intérieur. Il s'est appuyé pour cela sur un important dispositif d'encadrement scientifique, technique et administratif des agriculteurs.

Depuis quelques années et en partie face aux limites de cette politique productiviste, on assiste à une remise en cause des paradigmes du développement agricoles et à l'émergence de problématiques environnementales en prise avec des enjeux locaux et internationaux. Ces remises en cause débouchent notamment sur la reconnaissance de pratiques agricoles jusque là déconsidérées par les standards « modernistes ». Mais elles se traduisent aussi par une reconfiguration des programmes de recherche en appui au

développement et l'apparition d'ONG de protection de l'environnement comme nouveaux acteurs du développement.

Cette communication se propose d'étudier les conditions d'émergence de ces nouvelles préoccupations écologiques et les formes de leur intégration dans les stratégies de développement rural et l'arène politique locale.

Introduction

This paper presents the rudiments of a research program about the politics of the indigenous. Materials are based on field research conducted in New Caledonia, South Pacific.

To begin, I would like to stress how difficult it is, to locate New Caledonia in our conceptual map, specially the one separating the "North" and the "South".

With a domestic gross product (GDP) estimated about fifteen thousand \$US per inhabitant, this country can be considered among the wealthiest in the world. But this wealth is mainly capture by few settlers and by the expatriate community. On the other side, native people are mainly marginalised, from an economic standpoint.

New Caledonia is a French territory located in Oceania. It has about 200000 inhabitants, 44% of which are indigenous Melanesians, known as the "Kanak" people. Since the end of the eighties, following three years of a virtual civil war between kanak people and French settlers, the French state engaged progressively a decolonisation process.

The peace political agreement leads first to a sharing of local power between the rival factions: through a decentralisation programme, three "Provinces" were created. The "Northern" and "Loyalty Islands" Provinces, rural and inhabited by a majority of Kanak citizens, were ruled by the native "pro-independence" parties. On the other side, the Southern Province which included practically all the European population and which possessed all the industrial and commercial infrastructures, was under the control of the "loyalist" groups. Each Province possesses its own elected assembly, whose members also sit in the Congress of New Caledonia.

The second aspect of this political agreement was the engagement by French state of an important development programme for the Kanak community, in order to progressively lessen the economic inequalities between settlers and natives. As a large majority of the

Kanak people is living in remote rural areas, most of this development programme was directed towards the agricultural sector. These development programmes focused on a bioscientific approach, aiming at a modernisation of farming systems.

My papers tries to address factors explaining the failure of this modernisation policy and the emergence of a new environmental paradigm. I also argue that shifts from an agronomic to an ecological paradigm highlights a deeper qualitative change in the local political arena. It's also point out how globalisation is "reaching" south pacific islands, generally perceived as untouched remote areas.

I illustrate this process of "ecologisation" through the history of a conservatory of native yam species projects. The emergence of this conservatory is significant for at least two reasons:

- first because yam is a major plant in Kanak farming systems : as the staple food, but also form symbolic and ritual matters and as part of the ceremonial transaction between social groups. The conservation of the "native" species of yam was an important stake in terms of cultural identity, perceived as such by a majority of Kanak people;
- second, because this conservation programme was conceived to replace an former agronomic research farm, previously dedicated to the experimentation of high yield of new species of yam, for the local market.

In some extent, ecological matters were pushing away agronomic ones. "Indigenous plant", "Indigenous knowledge" and "endogenous development" discourse were replacing bioscientific, modernist as exogenous approaches. This process was associated with important shifts, in terms of research programmes for development. For instance, if one look at the main agronomic research center operating in New Caledonia, during the years 1993-98, almost all the research programmes were devoted to the development of the local food chain. But more recently, by the turn of the millennium, the core of the research programmes were dealing with ecological topics (mainly the protection of biodiversity).

How can we explain these shifts?

I argue that these trends are closely connected with the failures of the development politicise, specially those promoting equity and imbalances between communities. It is also associated with the introduction in New Caledonia, of a global environmentalism perspectives, specially those narratives promoting the role of indigenous communities, in the conservation of biodiversity.

And last but not least, these trends highlights some change in the political economy of rural sector, in New Caledonia.

The political economy of the rural sector.

This history of agricultural development in New Caledonia, is deeply rooted in the colonial history. Although the Territory was originally intended to become an agricultural colony, one cannot but remark on the fact that the Territory has remained well outside the aims assigned to it by the colonial State. During the Fifties, the coffee plantations were already on the decline. Coffee was the main agricultural speculation designed to play a part in rural New Caledonia.

It is certain that structural limitations can explain the weakness of the agricultural sector and the absence of a peasant population descended from small-time European settlers, in spite of the voluntarist policies of the State in this field. The usual explanation given is the limited nature of the domestic market; the remoteness of external market outlets; the lack of skilled labour. But these real limitations are further increased by those imposed by the economic system instituted very early on by local ruling groups.

In actual fact, from the very beginning of colonisation, a handful of individuals specialised in colonial trade have organised events in such a way as to block market access to a majority of the rural population. By controlling the strategic points for the circulation of goods (import-export trade and local trade), these parties have imposed a syndicated trading post economy and a populist political structure. They were thus able to acquire not only the political business of a number of the leading citizens of the rural zones, but also to buy up the produce of a large number of small-time settlers via a credit system which mortgaged local production.¹

The high level of economic insecurity that this populist system subjected on the farmers, and also the economic alternatives related to the presence of nickel mines in the rural zones

¹ The main reason for the alliance of a majority of small-time settlers in rural zones with the first Melanesian organisations to form the Union Calédonienne in 1953 was an expression of protest against the economic pressure they suffered at the hands of the "Noumea Powerfuls"

amply explain the low level of development of agricultural production in New Caledonia until recent years.

It was only in the Sixties, in a context of very severe agricultural depression, that the territorial administration (under the influence of the State) decided to set up more democratic structures allowing access to the domestic marketplace. Public Regulatory Bodies were created at this point of time². The aims of these bodies were clearly set out: they were to neutralise the monopoly of the trading houses; provide farmers with an outlet and a "fair revenue" .

However, at the beginning of the Eighties and, in particular, following the decentralisations launched in 1988, a process of political annexation of these regulatory bodies took place, turning them into mere instruments at the service of the agricultural policies of the Southern Province under the control of the anti-independentist political parties. Far from the spirit of mutual agreement of the "Matignon Accords", which were to put in train a process for the sharing of local power, the transitory nature of this institutional period designed to lead to a referendum for independence in 1998 actually produced in the country itself a logic of political and economic competition between the communities. The desire of the elected members of independentist communities for moving towards economic emancipation through the development of different means of production was confronted by the strategy of the Southern Province favouring an economic system artificially swollen by the transfer of finances from France³.

The control of the regulatory bodies by the elected members of the "RPCR" was designed to ensure their political allies access to the principal marketplace of Noumea. But it also allowed them to regulate the import of farming produce with the aim of keeping prices high, thereby allowing the producers they supported to profit from a part of the income that traditionally only went to the trading houses. The maintenance of high prices for agricultural produce was made possible by the high purchasing power of Noumea consumers; most of them enjoyed the benefit of high salaries topped up by transfers from France.

² In 1963, the OCEF (Office de Commercialisation et d'Entreposage Frigorifique - Office of Commercialisation and Storage of Frozen Goods) was created - mainly to ensure the sale of bovine meat products. In 1970, the ERPA was created (Etablissement de Régulation des Prix Agricoles - Organisation for the Regulation of Agricultural Prices) to fulfil a triple mission: "to ensure a fair income for producers; to provide the population with quality goods in sufficient; to oversee agricultural markets and prices. Finally, in 1974, a wholesale market was established in Noumea with the aim of "facilitating the production and sale of locally grown fruit and vegetables other than the potato"

³ On the particularities of the Caledonian macro-economic framework, cf Freyss (1995).

In this way, a large section of the rural communities of the Northern and Island Provinces were excluded - via the system of quotas put in place - from access to the only market on the Territory. This result was that, only a few years after the policies of political decentralisation and economic readjustment were put in train, the Southern Province was supplying almost all the agricultural produce of the Territory and had centralised practically all food industries, whereas the official census showed that the majority of the farming population lived in the Northern and Loyalty Island Provinces.⁴ What has been witnessed is a deliberate strategy of misappropriation, by the local "loyalist" lobbies, of the strategy of economic readjustment underwritten by the French State.

Access to resources and local governance.

In parallel with the decentralisation process or in its prolongation, several factors have contributed to exacerbating local conflicts or to the emergence of new strategic groups at the centre of the Kanak social formations. In effect, the ending of state intervention in the appointment of tribal chiefs and the democratic transfer of this power to the local populations; the emergence of new political parties in Melanesian society; the expansion of the land reforms; and finally the process of decentralisation itself and the appearance of new elective stakes, constitute just so many factors tending to feed the growth of inner contradictions. In general, in New Caledonia as elsewhere, the opening up of the local political arena after centuries of centralised administration, goes hand in hand with tensions or struggles for legitimate rights.

Nonetheless, looking beyond the transitory socio-political adjustments which of necessity accompany such changes, ten years of decentralisation in the conditions described above have resulted in the producing of wide cracks in the democratic and pluralist model which the French state now wishes to promote in New Caledonia. In the context of the Northern Province where we have based our research, the frustrations arising from the restrictions imposed on economic readjustment have resulted, in the first place, in the discrediting of elected political figures in relation to their social background, and in the development of a logic of particularism.

⁴ To take an example, it was reported, as early as 1993, that the farmers of the Southern Province were producing 92% of local vegetable produce, 69% of fruit production, 89% of beef production and 89% of pork production. Also, 80.5% of small agribusinesses were concentrated in the Southern Province who also employed 92.6% of salaried workers in this field.

Decentralisation - and this was one of its aims - has placed elected representatives face to face with those who elected them. For the first time in local political history, the decentralised local assemblies have wide powers and real financial clout. For the first time, as well, elected representatives are accountable to those they administer (and not to the territorial assembly or the central power).

In spite of the transfer of these powers from the State to the provincial authorities, we have observed that the elected pro independence authorities have been unable to execute the economic project placed in their hands.⁵

The failure of the policy of rural development clearly shown in the decline of their share of the agricultural marketplace following the control of access by the Southern Province, and the development of a modernised suburban agriculture strongly supported by those in power, has thus led the elected representatives of the Northern Province to redistribute the few resources they were able to mobilise without hindrance: administrative posts and small precarious jobs financed by the social funds transferred by the State.

This process of enforced reorientation from the initial economic scheme has not been without its consequences. Apart from the drift towards populism brought about by systematic recruiting into jobs in the public sector, it has also imposed on the pro independence provinces an increased dependency on transfers of funds from the French State which compromise their strategy of emancipation. The growing frustrations born of the increased marginalisation of the Provinces situated on the periphery of the marketplace have equally brought about a political radicalisation of the socialist independentist foundation which was clearly shown in 1995 by the eviction of the leadership of the "FLNKS" and the renewal of a large number of the elected members of the first provincial assembly in the last elections.

In parallel to this tendency, the new independentist leaders chose to re-centre their strategy of development in the mining sector.⁶ This is why, during the course of the months which preceded the signing last May of the "Noumea Agreements", the independentist leaders engaged in a real trial of strength with the State and above all the French company

⁵ This project, initially formulated by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the independentist leader assassinated in 1989, was based on "self-sufficiency through Kanak mastery of the sources of wealth (nickel, land, sea), the growth of domestic production and the conquest of the marketplace thanks to products "made in Kanaky". Bensa (1995: 330)

⁶ It should be noted here that 70% of the estimated resources of nickel ore in the territory are located in the Northern Province.

ERAMET, to obtain the control of the mining resources which would allow a new metallurgical plant to be constructed in the Northern Province.⁷

However, these high level negotiations for the control of the mining resources carried on from even earlier agreements, formed between the so called “tribal custom“ authorities and the mining companies. From the first years of decentralisation and in the prolongation of the land claims, the tribes located near the mining basins asserted their prerogatives concerning privileged access to the profits of mining operations.⁸

By way of these local agreements, the tribal custom authorities were able to strengthen their political positions through the recognition of their right to organise the recruitment of teams of workers, mainly in unskilled jobs. These local prerogatives undermined even more the capacity for economic administration and the management of the territory by the provincial and municipal authorities. They also weakened the action of the trade unions of the mining sector, who saw large numbers of employees passing under the direct control of the tribal authorities.

Finally, they accentuated the development of populist and particularist tendencies, as each tribal settlement henceforward asserted its prerogatives in the matter of control over the workforce.

Conclusion

This situation explain why many Kanak people became very receptive to the global environmental discourses. By 1995, New Caledonia has been labelled by international institutions and NGO's as a major “hotspot” in the world, for biodiversity. Since then, many NGO's such as WWF and Conservation International, implemented important conservation

⁷ This claim in fact re-opened an earlier project formulated at the end of the Fifties and in the Sixties by the Union Calédonienne, which also aimed to achieve economic adjustment between the industrial south and the rural north. This project was buried in 1969 by the Billotte laws.

⁸ For example, in an agreement signed in 1989 with the Société Le Nickel (SLN, the biggest mining and metallurgy company in New Caledonia, a subsidiary of the ERAMET group), the tribe of Ouaté (117 inhabitants in 1996) located on the west coast between the municipalities of Poya and Pouembout, obtained, in compensation for ore extracted within their sphere of influence, a series of advantages, notably, the priority employment of members of the tribe by the SLN and a guarantee that subcontractor markets would be attributed to small businesses created by members of the tribe. This kind of agreement has been copied in most of the mining centres opened since 1990.

programmes in Kanak areas. All these programmes claim they are closely associating local communities to the Conservation process. Discourses focused on the role and promotion of “indigenous communities” and “indigenous knowledge”. As a Kanak political leader told me during a recent fieldtrip : *“agriculture development cannot mobilize our people anymore. But environment does, because it speaks to us and about us. Indigenous values are taking into account, and today Kanak people is connected worldwide with Inuits, African and Indian...Our people is connected worldwide to “first nations”.”*

Through “Ecologisation”, native people feel as they were appropriating development process, rendering it something endogenous.

But as Gupta (1997 : 167) had already put it, *“another way to frame this problem is to pose the question of the relation between indigenous knowledge and the contemporary, late capitalist world. It seems paradoxical that the surge of interest in the indigenous in the last two decades has accompanied the geographic expansion and restructuring of capitalist process so that marginal groups in “isolated” areas are increasingly drawn into the circuits of capitalist production and consumption.”*

In the case of New Caledonia, few years after the arrival of international environmental NGO's, multinational mining companies arrived also, in order to implement industries in Kanak areas. With the same discourse of taking into account indigenous communities, saving their traditional culture, giving them a share in the exploitation of their natural resources and promoting their participation in the market economy.