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La présence kanak contains thirty four of Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s essays, speeches, and interviews. They run the gamut from ethnographic analysis to political advocacy, from policy to poetry; their tone is incisive, embattled, irreverent, eloquent. Alban Bensa and Éric Wittersheim have done a very effective job of selection and presentation. Their general introduction provides necessary historical background and interpretive themes, while abstaining, appropriately, from extensive analysis. They also clearly locate each text in a particular moment of Tjibaou’s individual development and of the Kanak independence struggle. La présence kanak, a richly woven history of personal vision, cultural analysis, and day-to-day activism, should become a classic document in the ongoing history of Pacific sovereignty struggles. In these movements, independence must be imagined and achieved in situations of continuing cultural and economic interdependence.

Tjibaou speaks and writes in dialogue with events. We follow the crucial moments of recent indigenous resurgence in New Caledonia: return in the late sixties of radical students from France (« Foulards rouges » and « Palika »); the initiative, largely organized by women, to restore and revitalize local villages; the energizing Kanak cultural festival of 1975, « Mélanésia 2000 »; political independence in neighboring Vanuatu; the founding of FLNKS in 1984 (The Socialist Front for Kanak National Liberation, of which Tjibaou was president); bitter struggles with the French government and white settlers leading to a bloody hostage crisis on the island of Ouvea; the partial Kanak victory and respite of the Matignon Accords. With Tjibaou’s assassination in 1989 the story told in La présence kanak abruptly ends. But Tjibaou, in his last speeches and interviews, is
acutely aware that nothing is guaranteed. And as a crucial referendum on self-determination approaches, we read this collection, an unfinished story of vision and activism, with feelings of suspense.

The story of personal development woven through the book is revealed piecemeal, largely in interviews. It is less a conversion narrative, a heroic coming to consciousness, than a picture of particular negotiations, complex relationships, through which an engaged life reworks the constraints and possibilities imposed by history. As a boy of nine, Tjibaou was sent by Father Alphonse Rouel, a liberal priest at Hienghène, to Catholic school in Canala. For the next twenty years his life was spent in schools and seminaries, culminating in a short period as an ordained priest. Tjibaou’s Catholic education introduced him to a wider world, but the cost was high: during these formative years, he lost command of his native tongue. In one interview, titled «Portrait d’un colonisé» and conducted at a time of violent confrontations, he records with bitterness the sometimes racist paternalism of his Catholic education. At other moments, however, he speaks with genuine gratitude of Father Rouel’s inspiration. And when he sharply criticizes the Catholic hierarchy’s reluctance to support Kanak independence, he does so as a believer. This does not impede his ability, on other occasions, to eloquently defend the spirituality of Melanesian traditions.

Tjibaou’s understanding of these traditions was mediated by another colonial legacy he would have to make his own: French ethnology. The young priest’s move toward political activism was hastened by several years of study in France which included, along with the upheavals of 1968, advanced ethnological training in Paris. Maurice Leenhardt, Roger Bastide, Pierre Métai and Jean Guiart were important influences. La présence kanak contains several analytic essays that grow directly from this training; and it is intriguing to see how ethnographic expositions take new forms in the political activist’s essays and interviews. For example, when Tjibaou explains his view of « development » or the meaning of the word « socialist » in the name of the Kanak movement, FLNKS, he invokes « the gift », a requirement to share, in terms that seem to be rewritten from Mauss (who himself derived the idea, in large degree, from Melanesian sources). For Tjibaou, Kanak « culture » is never a purely local tradition handed down from the indigenous past. Rather it is an inventive process, passed through historical circuits of exchange, and reappropriation. A living culture must link pasts and futures. « Our identity » he writes, «is ahead of us » (p. 185).

Thus there is no absolute contradiction (though there are real tensions) in his use of ethnological perspectives derived from a European science. Similarly, his Christian faith dialogues with deeply-held customary values rooted in the Grande Terre. The Bible, he argues in one interview, does not belong to White people. Neither does cross-cultural understanding. No doubt Tjibaou’s expansive Kanak humanism, a recurring aspiration to the « universal », owes something to Catholicism. But it cannot be reduced to a transcendent faith. Tjibaou never
resolves, nor does he wish to, a basic tension: on the one hand, spiritual life experienced at the scale of clan and local ecology, on the other, human commonalities at regional and global levels.

The colonial legacy is a site of struggle and exchange, a historical relationship constitutive of the person, from which there is no simple escape. For Tjibaou, France is a colonial adversary, but never an «other». The ongoing relationship with France must be transformed, allowing older traditions and environments to evolve into original futures. He comes to see that some form of political independence is essential to such an outcome; for there can be no real dialogue (always his ultimate goal) except between equals. But sovereignty is ultimately «the right and the power to negotiate interdependences» (p. 179). Taking interdependence for granted, Tjibaou assumes that effective Melanesian power will always be articulated in spaces of struggle and negotiation with the colonial and neo-colonial forces traversing his small island. These include French settler colonization, Asian/Pacific immigrations, and the very mixed-blessings of «development» (particularly nickel mining and tourism).

Tjibaou's basic hope is that Kanaks will be able to feel authentically at home in the 21st century, free from foreign exploitation and sustaining their own style or saveur. He is perhaps best known as a pioneer in the mobilization of culture and identity which he sees as essential sources of strength but not ends in themselves. Kanak culture, always part of a political movement, is performed, «exteriorized» in new contexts such as the festival «Mélanésia 2000», in art exhibits in Noumea or Paris, in diverse venues of Pacific collaboration, and at the United Nations. To be locally rooted is not to be isolated; culture and identity are engaged in interactive processes. In La présence kanak we follow Tjibaou's growing grasp of a social movement which must «bien calculer les interdépendences» (p. 179) at simultaneously cultural, political, and economic levels.

The Kanak identity that emerges from his writings is pragmatic and contemporary, cosmopolitan while locally rooted. This complex, necessarily ambivalent, conception of a historically-constituted subject is perhaps the most important contribution of La présence kanak. In one of his last interviews, for an African journal, Tjibaou returns to the importance of tradition, of preserving the basic «structures of mediation and communication» in customary knowledge. But these structures will have to operate at new local/global scales. In contemporary struggles for identity and power, struggles from which he insisted there was no escape, Kanaks will use all possible technologies: radio, video, TV, and computers: they will promote their way of life through art exhibits and cultural festivals, through responsible exploitation of land and ocean resources, through locally-controlled tourism. Being Kanak in the 21st century requires a flexible sense of «authenticity»: «Pour moi, ce qui est authentique, c’est ce qui est vécu et donne de la saveur à ce que chacun vit. Ce que mon père, mon grand-père, mon arrière-grand-père ont vécu, toutes leurs expériences des rites, de la tradition, de

One wonders how this « présence Kanak » will be memorialized in an impressive structure — a museum? — about to open its doors in Noumea: the « Centre culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou »?

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