

The creative constitution of an archipelago: Intercultural dynamics in the belep islands of Kanaky new caledonia

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# THE CREATIVE CONSTITUTION OF AN ARCHIPELAGO

Intercultural dynamics in the Belep Islands of Kanaky New  
Caledonia

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**ABSTRACT:** This article considers the Belep islands archipelago in Kanaky New Caledonia as a geo-cultural project in which human collective agency plays a crucial role. In the constitution of the archipelago, geomorphology interweaves with historical, intersubjective and intercultural process of cultural creativity. Cultural creativity is presented here as a theoretical framework and as a useful tool to understand the emergence of original and unexpected forms in many domains of Indigenous island societies who are actively engaged with exogenous forces. In particular, the article concentrates on those historical and contemporary processes that emerge in intercultural dynamics and shape the archipelago, leading first to its *reduction*, then to its *condensation* in a new form (the village of Waala), and, most recently, to its *expansion*.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural creativity, archipelagraphy, colonialism/post-colonialism, Kanaky New Caledonia, Belep Islands

## Introduction

Reflecting on cultural change and continuing concerns about Indigenous cultural survival, Marshall Sahlins states:

*In too many narratives of Western domination, the Indigenous peoples appear merely as victims... whose own agency disappeared more or less with their culture, the moment Europeans erupted on the scene. (2000: 44-45)*

According to the anthropologist, one of the main academic consequences of the violence inflicted to the colonised peoples was the developing of a “despondency theory” (Sahlins, 1999, 2000) that became popular in a variety of forms throughout the 20th Century. “Despondency theory” refers to several authors and heterogeneous theories that, more or less explicitly, stated the unavoidable discouragement, despair and even hopelessness of Indigenous societies, doomed to a definitive cultural loss as a result of their fatal contact with Western society. According to despondency theory, Indigenous cultures were destined to vanish or, if surviving, to become homogenous within the predominant Western culture. In the second half of the 20th Century, Dependency theory took over as the logical continuation of despondency theory. Various theoretical approaches spanning several decades share a sense of cultural tragedy, the idea that ‘traditional’ cultures can try at the most to resist colonial and post-colonial forces. “It is as if other peoples had constructed their

lives for our purposes, in answer to racism, sexism, imperialism, and the other evils of Western society” (Sahlins, 1999: v). The notion of cultural difference being flattened by the homogenising forces of world capitalism arises in various contexts, with regard to cultures reacting to the overwhelming power of Western nations and, later, to neoliberal capitalism. Some theories of globalisation and, more recently, climate change narratives emphasising the image of sinking islands, operate in the same despondency and dependency framework. Countering these approaches, Sahlins draws attention to the fact that, contrary to any pessimistic scenario, Indigenous people are still there and are still Indigenous.

*Local societies... do attempt to organize the irresistible forces of the world-system according to their own system of the world— in various forms and with varying success, depending on the nature of the indigenous culture and the mode of external domination. (ibid: v)*

Indigenous cultures and their own systems of the world do not simply react to domination and its effects, they are capable of a positive action and have historically demonstrated cultural agency. Sahlins describes this agency – in somewhat provocative and controversial terms – as an “indigenization of modernity”, referring to the process of integrating and reconfiguring exogenous elements in specific cultural patterns. Thinking about cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of traditional forms in the Pacific Islands – the same part of the world from which Sahlins draws many examples of indigenisation of modernity – James Clifford acknowledges that the “creation of unexpected politico-religious ensembles, often in moments of colonial stress, is what first fascinated me about the region” (2003: 88).

Indigenous societies organise the flows of goods and gods, ideas and technologies, people and plants, animals and even pathogens coming from elsewhere (not only from the West), in new, original and also unpredictable ways. The emergence of unprecedented and unexpected forms in many domains – from economy to politics, religion, art, and wellbeing, just to name some – is pushing scholars to look beyond the theories of change, creolisation or globalisation. Italian anthropologist Adriano Favole, for instance, has elaborated a theory of “cultural creativity” to understand the dynamics of the collective agency shaping those original forms. According to Favole, the indigenisation of modernity proposed by Sahlins is one of the numerous conceptual tools useful for a broader theory of cultural creativity. Indigenous philosophies, also, provide formidable tools, such as the concept of culture as a “permanent reformulation” developed by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, one of the leaders of Kanak independentism in Kanaky New Caledonia.<sup>1</sup> Favole observes that in Oceanian insular societies cultural creativity is:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Kanak’ is a neologism deriving from the term ‘kanak’. This term offers an example of Indigenous appropriation and re-semantisation. Coming from the Hawaiian *kanaka* (human being), it entered the language of European ships’ crews sailing the Pacific Ocean as a pejorative term used to denigrate Melanesian Indigenous peoples. This sense was overturned by the Independence movements in 1970s and today Kanak is the ethnonym claimed by the Indigenous people of New Caledonia and has been officially recognised since 1998. Although the official name of this special Collectivity of France is New Caledonia, the expression ‘Kanaky New Caledonia’ is used increasingly often and embraces the decades-long struggle for the recognition of the Kanak people and for independence from France which has led to the present situation of shared sovereignty.

*a process that springs with particular urgency in the encounter, in the relation, in situations of coexistence or conviviality, even in the impact between different cultures and societies. (2010: 36 – author’s translation)*

Creativity is thus considered as a historic, intersubjective and intercultural process. In Oceania, this process has produced emerging local forms of Christianity, democracies that combine elected politicians and traditional chiefs, and economies that encompass business profit and the gift-exchange logic. Also, the current constraints of non-self-governing islands, as Kanaky New Caledonia, are turned by Indigenous societies into occasions for articulations, appropriations and re-semantisations offering reformulations through creative syntheses of endogenous and exogenous forces.

Focusing on the small archipelago of Belep islands in Kanaky New Caledonia, the aim of this article is to consider the area as a geo-cultural project, in which human collective agency plays a crucial role. The Belep archipelago is the product of a human and non-human co-construction, in which geomorphic processes and features – related to distance from other islands, soil composition, hydrographic regime etc. – interweave with cultural and intercultural processes and practices. In particular, I will concentrate on those historical and contemporary intercultural processes that led first to the *reduction* of the archipelago, to its *condensation* in a new form (a village), and then to its *expansion*. The scope of the analyses of historic and ethnographic data from Belep shows the active engagement of its Indigenous society in governing and shaping contemporaneous global forces. In the following paragraphs, I will first describe the processes of reduction, from an archipelago to a village, due to the combined action of missionaries, local chiefs, and colonial administration. I will then highlight some local practices of resistance and creativity, especially at a spatial, ritual and spiritual level, that recreate the archipelago in the village and show the active appropriation of new forces and meanings. Finally, some examples of cultural practices will be considered and analysed as part of current processes of centre and periphery reversal, leading to expansion of the archipelago.

## Belep

The Belep Islands are situated about 50 km north-west of Grande Terre, the main island in the Kanaky New Caledonia archipelago (Figure 1). The term Belep is used to indicate simultaneously: 1) the small archipelago formed of three islands and various islets; 2) the municipality, which is part of the Northern Province; and 3) the chiefdom, founded by Teã Belep in the 16th Century, which is one of the longest lasting in Kanaky New Caledonia. With a surface area of approximately 50 km<sup>2</sup>, Dau ar ('the island of the sun' in *pulum Belep*, the local language) is the biggest of the three islands comprising the Belep archipelago and hosts the village of Waala, the only permanently occupied settlement in the Belep Islands. In Waala, the 843 residents can access all the services that the archipelago provides: water supply, electricity and telephone lines, and has a mayor's office and town facilities, a post office, a medical centre, infant and elementary schools, a football pitch, a volleyball court, some shops, *kavebu* (the seat of the chiefdom) and a Catholic church. A jetty where the catamaran and the small barge that link the archipelago with Grande Terre can moor is located in the bay of Waala, and a few kilometres away there is a small airstrip. Whilst all the services and most of the population are concentrated in the village of Waala, the Belema people, constantly travel to Phwoc, Dau Ac (man Island) and to the Daos (the smaller islets).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dau ar and Phwoc are usually referred to as 'Art' and 'Pott' in official maps (and in the Nation Online map reproduced below). The term 'Belema' indicates the community associated with the chiefdom of

The main reason for these visits is fishing, which represents an important source of sustenance as well as the main economic activity. Furthermore, some of the Belep clans have their ancestral lands in Phwoc, where, among other edible plants, they grow yams,<sup>3</sup> a tuber that has a fundamental value in Kanak culture. The relationship that has linked the islands of Belep archipelago since their initial human settlement, is still maintained in local practices and knowledge, in mythology, in genealogy and in the dense toponymy.



Figure 1 – Map of New Caledonia (with the Belep archipelago at top left). (Nations Online Project, n.d.)

Nevertheless, depending on the person describing it – on whether or not he/she has local knowledge and experience – Belep can be referred to as an archipelago, an island or a village. This terminological uncertainty reveals the extent to which the topographical cohesion of groups of islands is not ‘natural’ but is the product of cultural choices and practices. Paying particular attention to archipelagos as discursive constructs, Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens suggest that archipelagos should be considered “as power-

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Belep, both living in the Belep Islands and in other parts of Kanaky New Caledonia. Of the 843 residents of Belep, over 96% claim to belong to the Kanak people (ISEE, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The clan (*âma naen* in Belep) is the basic unit of social organisation in Kanak society. It refers to a group of people sharing a last name and a mythic totemic ancestor (Belep *janu*, ‘spirit’), and it is based on patrilineality and exogamy. The paternal clan forms the main reference for identifying individuals, but the relationship with the maternal clan is fundamental in all stages of the life cycle. The term ‘clan’ was introduced by missionaries and ethnographers and entered the administration and everyday language. In Belep it is often used and generally refers to a lineage of a larger kinship group that originated in other islands. When referring to ‘clan’ in this article, this emic use of the word must be understood.

constituted... only in relation to national, imperial, linguistic, racial, ethnic, tectonic, or other heuristics” (Roberts and Stephens, 2017: 31). According to the two authors:

*the wide-ranging human project of describing—and conjuring into existence—the coherence of groups of islands has been a prime example of catachresis,<sup>4</sup> one that has taken place across historical epochs and across cultures and regions. (ibid)*

One of the preferred tools in the formation of the archipelago, in this case of Belep, the “catachresis” has been countered by an opposing process of metonymic reduction. Indeed, the space of the archipelago has been discursively reduced to a single, isolated island, negating the undersea connections between land and sea, island and island that are so common in Belema mythology and geography. This reduction is pushed as far as cutting the island's internal connections and compressing the living space of its inhabitants into a single village. The progressive reduction of the (socio-cultural) archipelago to a village, on a linguistic level (and the deeper meaning of that process) cannot be understood without referring to the historical and political process of centralisation that took place in the Belep Islands. This process involved endogenous and exogenous forces and operated on various levels, beginning in the middle of the 19th Century with the creation of the village of Waala.

#### From the archipelago to the village: *reduction*

Waala village is the complex outcome of the conjunction of outside proposals and the activity of the Belema themselves, and it is part of a wider process of transformation of political groupings, social institutions and cultural categories fundamental to Belema society. In particular, it is the result of the combination of two projects: the political project of Waulo Chahup II, an enterprising local chief, engaged in trying to subvert the traditional limits to his power; and the religious project of three French missionaries from the Society of Mary, whose arrival in Belep, in 1856, was strongly endorsed by Waulo Chahup II. At that time, the islands of Phwoc and Dau ar were dotted with small coastal settlements that sprung up near the yam fields. The main reason for this settlements' distribution is in the adaptation of the Indigenous land tenure system to the geomorphological features of these islands. In the Belep Islands the soil is ferralitic and, therefore, not very suited to horticulture; the only fertile lands lie in the inlets of the coast where alluvial deposits enrich the ground. Still today, crops and, in particular, the massive yam fields (Figure 2) are situated close to the bays where the ancient settlements and fields were located at that time. Separated by a few kilometres, Phwoc and Dau ar were linked by political agreements and marriage ties but formed political groups that were distinct and even in conflict, each with its own network of alliances and its own language.<sup>5</sup> Waulo Chahup II killed the *teâ* (chief) of Phwoc and put the island under his control initiating a process of redefinition of his political power. The arrival of the Catholic missionaries fully participated in this process of social and political transformation. Waulo played a decisive role in installing the mission and in its rapid success: he imposed on the

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<sup>4</sup> Originally a term referring to erroneous semantic usage, the term has been used within modern critical discourse to refer to terminologies imposed on groups that represent an identity and/or cohesion that was not present prior to the ascription of the term.

<sup>5</sup> The only trace remaining of the ancient language spoken in Phwoc, and now long-lost, is a lullaby, *Orotoi*, passed down by various elderly women and transformed into a song by a local musical group in the 1990s.

whole population not only the conversion to Catholicism but also relocation to a single central settlement, to where he moved the seat of the chiefdom (*kavebu*) (Dubois, 1985).



Figure 2 – Freshly planted yam ridge (*toop*) with supports and old coconut leaves. (Author's photo 2017)

The plan for political and religious dominance enacted by Waulo and the Marist missionaries required unification of the population within a single central settlement. As in other Pacific islands, the Marist missionaries established a “reduction” based on the model of the *reducciones de indios* (indigenous reductions) created a few centuries before by the Jesuits in South America.<sup>6</sup> Bringing the Belema together around the mission buildings at Waala seemed to be the best way of ensuring their effective conversion to Catholicism. The processes of production and distribution of symbolic and material resources were likewise centralised, and the social role and political power of the *teâmaa* (the political chief) were strengthened to the detriment of complementary figures, such as those of the *kawu pwemwa* (‘masters of the land’) (Douglas, 1982). Waulo Chahup II, who took the name of Amabili Waulo when baptised, violently discouraged the resistance that some clans posed to the central settlement. Within a couple of years, all the inhabitants of Dau ar had abandoned their scattered settlements and moved to Waala (Figure 3). A few years later, the *teâmaa* and the missionaries replicated this same population, power, and resource concentration scheme on Phwoc (Gilibert, 2007). Nevertheless, in 1874, the Poyama (the inhabitants of Phwoc) were forced to abandon this second reduction, and after having suffered from periodic epidemics, they moved to Waala. A French settler took up residence on Phwoc shortly thereafter, and the Belema lost all rights to the island a few years later. It was only in 2010 that some clans were able to reclaim their lands.

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<sup>6</sup> For further details on reductions in Oceania see, for instance, Laux (1999). Referring in particular to Polynesian islands and underlying the importance of the pre-existing social and political structures as well as the Indigenous agency, Laux suggests that the Jesuits’ reductions were regarded by the Marist missionaries more as an ideal model of success than an actual pattern to be reproduced in Oceania.



Figure 3 – Waala Bay (with Belep-Grand Terre catamaran in the harbour), viewed from the church. (Author's photo 2017)

As pointed out in an earlier article (Favole and Giordana, 2018), over the past 150 years, the history of the Belep Islands has been characterised by a dual process: while the creation of the central settlement facilitated internal centralisation, it also produced the progressive marginalisation of the small archipelago relative to the rest of New Caledonia. For many years, the Beleps were seen as small islands lacking resources and with a precarious ecological equilibrium. They attracted the interest of missionaries, colonial administrators, various merchants, and a few settlers who sought to set up businesses. Most of those businesses failed due to an insularity, that they contributed to, increasingly transforming into isolation. The small size of the islands as well as small population, spatial discontinuity and relative distance from Grande Terre were initially profitable to those projects. Belep's growing isolation appealed even more to the colonial administration, in its quest for the perfect place to relocate 'undesirables' from various parts of the French colony. When the Kanak of Grande Terre revolted in 1878, over 300 men, women, and children were deported to Dau ar and, in part, to Phwoc. In 1892, the island of Dau ar was requisitioned as the site of a leper colony, destined to house the sick from all over New Caledonia (Devambe, 1989). The Belema strongly opposed the island's evacuation, but their efforts were in vain. The leper colony was established, and the same fate of exile befell the Belema themselves. They were transferred to Balade (Grande Terre), where they lived, starving, for seven years, before being allowed to return to Dau ar (Dubois, 1985).

The policy of displacement and concentration of the population resulted in a reduction of social and ecological relationships. The disruption of cultural and social links at local and regional levels seems, indeed, to be the basis of all the projects for Belep's economic development – both those attempted by the missionaries and those of the colonial administration. The relationship with the sea and the mobility that it allows was firstly reduced, thus limiting the possibility for the Belema to access others, other islands, and other lands linked by the sea. The reduction in relationships with the outside world turned insularity into isolation. In the fifty years following the establishment of the village of Waala, the Belep population was decimated by repeated illnesses, famines and forced displacements imposed by the colonial administration. Entire clans disappeared, cultivated lands dwindled



and the archipelago ‘lost’ one of its islands, which could not be officially recovered by the islanders even after the withdrawal of the French settlers.

### Reversing centre and periphery: resistance and creativity

The Belep islands still today appear to be marginal relative to the socio-political and economic importance of Grande Terre, and especially the capital Nouméa. They seem to fall into the general category of hyper-insularity (or double insularity) that gathers those islands that are:

*secondary members of an archipelago – [that] have only very limited leeway as regards political, economic or social initiatives, and... are consequently peripheral to the global economy. (Taglione, 2011: 55)*

However, the hyper-insularity of Belep cannot be simply observed, as an evident result of the geo-morphological architecture of the archipelago and the scarcity of transport links, further limited in case of bad weather. Rather, it may be useful to analyse this hyper-insularity also as the fruit of a historic and political process that involved endogenous and exogenous forces, colonial and post-colonial politics, and operated on various levels and scales. As in other Pacific islands, a model based on a centre-periphery axis was imposed upon local political and social organisation in Kanaky New Caledonia. This is a model that has been replicated at different scales, similar to the never-ending pattern of fractals, thus producing actual islands-of-islands in many Overseas Territories (Favole and Giordana, 2018). According to this pattern, Phwoc is peripheral to Dau ar, and both islands are peripheral to the central village of Waala, Belep is peripheral to Grande Terre, *la brousse* (‘the bush’, as the rural territory of Grande Terre is usually referred to in New Caledonia) is peripheral to the capital Nouméa and Kanaky New Caledonia itself is peripheral to France.

Attempts to disrupt this centre-periphery logic have directed the main policies of Kanaky New Caledonia in recent decades in various areas. The creation of three administrative provinces in 1989 aimed to balance the heterogeneous population distribution (concentrated in the Southern Province, where Nouméa is located) and the parallel distribution of services, centres of power and wealth. This was followed by a number of measures promoting an economic ‘rebalancing’ among the three provinces. In the Northern Province and Loyalty Islands Province the majority of the population belongs to the Kanak community, and one of the requests from the Kanaks for decolonisation was the creation of a ‘second capital’ in the North of Grande Terre. Similarly, the recent installation of a mining industry for the extraction of nickel (the main natural resource of the country) in the north, responds to the historical presence of a similar metallurgical plant in the south. Space is crucial in Kanak societies (and more broadly in Oceanian cultures), and it is key also in colonial and post-colonial processes, since it still participates in social inequalities. Nouméa continues to grow and socio-economic disparities are persistent, confirming the need for rebalancing and the importance of space/place/land issues. On another scale, the progressive transfer of the state’s competencies from Paris to New Caledonia, as foreseen by the Nouméa Agreement of 1998, disrupts the centre-periphery model that has characterised the relationship between the French Metropole and its territories. The exceptional status of Kanaky New Caledonia is a fertile ground for legal, economic and political innovation: the coexistence of two forms of civil status (civil law and customary law), a shared sovereignty, a special electorate for self-determination referenda, economic initiatives managed under customary law through the GDPLs (*groupements de droit particulier local*, local groups with special rights), and

Indigenous management of mining industries are just some examples of the emergence of original forms.

Coming back to the Belep Islands, a deep change has occurred in the past two centuries. This change has been characterised by dramatic loss, as already mentioned, but also by resistance (as the Belema relatedly tried to move back to their ancestral lands) and cultural creativity. In the next section I will focus on the village of Waala, and in particular on the analyses of ethnographic data that I collected in Belep, through extended participant observation and in depth interviews with the Belema people in the Belep Islands and Nouméa. In particular, I draw on my research with the *teâ* (clans' chiefs) during my fieldwork in 2009 and 2010 (for doctoral research on human and non-human relationships in Belep Islands) and on a shorter period of participant observation undertaken in 2017 to update and integrate previous analyses with new data. Far from being just imposed from outside or from above, the village is actually an original product of this cultural creativity, and also a space for resistance and the ongoing active appropriation of new forces and meanings. Finally, some examples of cultural practices will be considered and analysed as part of current processes of centre and periphery reversal and of expansion of the archipelago.

The archipelago in the village: the row of pots, or roots and routes

*Uvi*, the yam, is *cexeen* (sacred), because it is similar to man.<sup>7</sup> The Belema refer to *uvi* with the same terms that indicate the human being and its parts: hence, *bwa* (head) and *ka* (feet) can be distinguished. During ceremonial exchanges, the head of the yam must be facing towards the person speaking; it is, therefore, the movement of the yam placed at the top of the gifts pile that indicates whose turn it is to speak and it is said that “the head of the yam is the spokesperson”. The yam serves “to explain what the human being is like”.<sup>8</sup> The most widespread method of yam reproduction consists of cloning and it offers such an effective correlation on a social level as to become a powerful representation of the Kanak society. As for yam, whose parts are scattered and replanted to generate new tubers which are the clone of one same individual plant, so it is for the clan, which splits itself over the course of its history to give life to new groups (Kasarhérou, 1990). The heads of the tubers are generally kept in order to be replanted and to produce new plants; rotting in the earth they supply nourishment to new yams: at this point they are referred to by the expression *nya*, which means ‘mother’. To dig up the yam, crowbars are used, but this is undertaken with caution for fear of scratching the skin of the tuber: a scratched yam is wounded (*têboe*), it cannot be preserved and used for ceremonial exchanges. However, in order to know which kind of tuber is being offered, so as to be sure that it is one of the most suitable varieties, that is, *jua uvi* (true yam), the skin is slightly grazed; then it is said that “te na bwau”, it has a small wound. As soon as the yam is removed, the hole in the earth must be refilled, otherwise the *toop* (the large ridge for cultivation) will produce bastard yams, called *naejec*, “the children

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<sup>7</sup> The yam symbolises the man, just as the *nu* (coconut tree) symbolises the woman. *Cexeen* (sacred, taboo) refers to the sphere of meaning defined in Polynesian languages with the term *tapu*. In Belep, in an analogous and specular way to *uvi*, the dugong (*Dugong dugon*), called *modap* in the local language, is vested with great symbolic value and considered *cexeen*, because, once again, it is similar to the human being.

<sup>8</sup> These and similar phrases were expressed several times by different people during my fieldwork in Belep islands. I am (and I will always be) particularly grateful to Ignacia and Gal MOILOU, Henriette TEANYOUEEN, Philippe TEANYOUEEN and all the *teâ* (clans' chiefs) for their patient sharing of knowledge. (NB following a graphic convention widespread in Kanaky New Caledonia, clans' names are written in capital letters.)

of the forest”, that is to say, children who are not recognised.<sup>9</sup> To neglect these particular cautions has negative consequences; it can lead, for example, to the infertility of one’s own field, thus making a person unable to participate in cultural exchange networks, where yams are a necessity for status and wealth.

The importance of this tuber for Kanak society is such as to have led André Georges Haudricourt to talk of “yam civilisation” (1964). The relationship between the human being and plants that is expressed through traditional horticulture is, indeed, at the same time spiritual and technical. The yam is nourishment *par excellence* and holds a first-rate place in ceremonial exchanges; it is the most noble offer, destined for the chiefs, the elders, the honoured guests. Every act that takes place on the yam field has a symbolic value, but the first harvest is a decisive moment. It is celebrated by means of a ceremony called *Dao uvi* (yam leaf) that meaningfully takes place on Easter Sunday. *Dao uvi* expresses and renews the ties between the *âma naen* (the clans) and with the *teâmaa*.<sup>10</sup> In preparing for the feast, the various families of every clan collect tubers from each of their cultivated fields. Each domestic group, therefore, makes its own contribution. The clan’s yams are pooled so as to be chosen and prepared by the women, who only on this occasion use the whole tuber, without reserving the upper part for reproduction. Yams of different varieties and from different *toops* and fields are mixed together in each cooking pot in such a way that the content of every pot represents all the clan’s lands. Finally, the large cast iron pots, still steaming, are carried to *kavebu*. The whole village gathers on the great meadow, in front of the entrance of *mwa pulu* (the Great House where the chief and the clan council gather). The *teâ* (clans’ chiefs) arrange the pots of their own clans so as to form a row in front of the *teâmaa*. The pots are first presented to the chief and then blessed by the priest (or the catechist) and their contents are consumed by the corresponding *âma naen* (clans) spread out across the clearing.

The arrangement of the cooking pots for the presentation is by no means random but follows a precise order that recreates the succession of the clans in the village. Indeed, squeezed between the slopes of the surrounding highlands and the sea, the village is subdivided into seven tribes, each bearing the name of a Roman Catholic saint. In New Caledonia the term *tribu* (tribe) was introduced by the colonial administration to mean ‘reservation’. In this non-standard usage – and particularly in Belep – *tribu* often refers to a place (a piece of land which is administered according to the customary law), rather than to the people who live there. Generally, the tribes encompass both living spaces and those allocated for vegetable-growing, as well as sacred sites for the clans that inhabit them. Due to the concentration of the population of Belep in the central village, the spatial continuity between dwellings, gardens and sacred sites fades. In Waala the tribes are arranged along the road running parallel to the beach, and each one has its own access to the sea. They represent the main living and ritual space of the clans, where most of the great ceremonial exchanges that mark the stages of the life cycle occur.

The Belema often point out that there is a correspondence between the tribes in Waala and the *nana pwang*, the clans’ bays of origin where the ancestors lived before relocating to the village. The presence of the ancestors is still strong in the *nana pwang*. That is the main reason why, even today, the most powerful and significant sites of each clan are situated in those same bays, as well as the yam gardens. The correspondence between tribes and *nana*

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<sup>9</sup> The term is offensive.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to what occurs in Grande Terre, in fact, the offer of the first fruits is not addressed to the ‘masters of the land’, but to the *teâmaa*.

*pwang* is reflected in the distribution of the clans in the village space. Indeed, the clans native to the same bay or coming from nearby inlets usually settle in the same tribe. Following the road through the village, the disposition of the tribes maintains the exact sequence of the groups who originate from the southern part of Dau ar, then from the north of the island, and finally from Phwoc. The layout of the clans in the village reproduces, in a limited space, the arrangement of the ancient settlements spread along the coasts of the archipelago.

The row of steaming pots in front of the Great House on the occasion of *Dao uvi* replicates the sequence of clans along the Waala road. We can thus interpret the *Dao uvi* row of pots as a kind of double-scale map representing both the village and the archipelago. Each group of pots represents a clan (or an association of two clans that are thus coupled also in spatial terms), and its position in the row corresponds to the clan's location in the village; at the same time, the row of pots is also the projection on one line of the ancient tribes scattered across the Belep archipelago, as if due to an implosion. Indeed, each pot contains a mix of yams from the clan's *nana pwang* and symbolises the deep attachment to the ancestral lands. Lifting the pots' lids, it is like revealing an exploded-view drawing of Waala, which shows the village disassembled in its parts so as to allow the components' assembly order, position, and connections to be understood. Imagining such a drawing with the tribes distanced from the centre, we could easily superimpose the current tribes in the village onto the ancient areas of peopling along the coast of the Belep Islands. Therefore, the row of pots at *kavebu* represents the road around which the clans are gathered in the village and depicts their path towards *kavebu*. Each pot, in turn, contains a jumble of paths which link each clan with its lands within the archipelago. The archipelago is literally condensed into the pots of yam aligned in front of the *teâmaa*.

A new and, at the same time, pre-existing correspondence between spatial arrangement and social organisation emerged since the initial stages of the creation of the village as a form of resistance to the new dwelling model. Since the birth of Waala, the Belema resisted the centripetal attraction of the village, continuing the sacred relationship with their ancestral lands in the rest of the Belep Islands, through yam cultivation. The separation of the Belema from their native lands could not be complete because the only horticultural lands are found there. Furthermore, the bond between the Bay of Waala and the other bays, between the village and the clans' native lands, between the village and the archipelago is an ongoing one. It is displayed in the precise sequence of tribes in the village, and it is periodically recreated in a creative process through the ceremony of *Dao uvi*.

### From the village to the archipelago: expansion

The Belep Islands are linked to other islands of Kanaky New Caledonia where Belema people live. The Belema community numbers more than 1,700 people in total, half of which actually reside outside the small archipelago but still maintain strong bonds with the chiefdom (INSEE, 2015). The Belema, indeed, perform what has been defined as “Kanak hypermobility” (Pantz, 2018). The great increase in Kanak urbanisation, especially in the capital Nouméa, is not accompanied by a full-blown rural depopulation; rather a phenomenon similar to multi-residentiality can be observed, thanks to which the Kanak people appear ubiquitous. Once the Belema children have finished their pre-school and primary school periods, for example, they continue their scholastic path on Grande Terre, in Poum or Nouméa, depending on where their relatives (often maternal uncles), to whom they are entrusted during the school period, live. They return to Belep several times a year, for their holidays, during which many of the Belema community's most important ritual activities are concentrated. Additionally,

four hundred kilometres south east of Waala we find Les Jardins de Belep (Belep's Gardens), a small residential area on the outskirts of the capital, founded in the 1980s to accommodate those Belema employed in the building of the nearby dam of Yaté. Today, it has a population of around 250 inhabitants, most of whom are still native to Belep. Les Jardins de Belep represents an important reference point for those from the islands who move for a time to the town, for health or administrative reasons, to look for work, or to visit their children being educated in Nouméa, or to make purchases for their clan, especially ahead of important ceremonies. The deep relationships of affection and belonging that the inhabitants of Les Jardins de Belep maintain with their clans and their homelands are periodically renewed, for example, through attending the yam fields in addition to the constant prospect of a return to the islands. Les Jardins de Belep has strong ceremonial and political relations with the chiefdom and the Belep municipality, despite being situated in another customary area and in a different province.<sup>11</sup> Every time a funeral or wedding is celebrated in Waala, a delegation sets out from Les Jardins de Belep to reach the village and participate through gifts and with money gathered by the small community of emigrants. At a ritual level, the centre-periphery logic is thus reversed, since Waala represents the ritual centre, and Nouméa its periphery. Les Jardins de Belep can thereby be considered as an 'island' of the Belep archipelago, an archipelago that is now expanding.

Among the strategies that the Belema have initiated to recover, enhance and even 'expand' their archipelago, we can list: 1) the re-acquisition of Phwoc in 2010, after decade-long claims; 2) the *désenclavement* (opening up) plan for Dau ar, aiming at urbanising two sites of ancient settlement and thus decentralising a part of the population of Waala; and 3) a re-embrace of the sea through fishing and environmental protection activities. Indeed, with regard to the latter, customary law has an aquapelagic orientation,<sup>12</sup> in that it regards the sea as an integral part of the territory that is touched by its waters. All over Kanaky New Caledonia the land-sea continuity is a vital element for local societies as it guarantees the resources necessary to maintain the social groups both from the material point of view of their livelihood and from the symbolic and political point of view of their cultural continuity (Leblic, 2008). Furthermore, the Kanak concept of territories that are today governed according to the *coutume* (custom/customary law) originate in a cosmology that moves between the territories of the chthonic clans and those whose myths speak of migration, often by sea. The profoundly aquapelagic aspect of Belep is also evident in its imaginary, with regard to powerful marine symbolism, often relates to Phwoc, together with a rich series of sea toponyms common across all the Beleps.

For the clans indigenous to the island, the return to (and of) Phwoc is the fulfilment of an affective and intimate relationship made of desire and memory. However, on a symbolic and spiritual level, Phwoc is a fundamental reference for all the Belema, as is shown by the widespread knowledge of oral traditions and topography. Although stripped of its

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<sup>11</sup> The customary areas, set up in 1988 in the Matignon Accord, constitute special partitions parallel to the administrative partitions of New Caledonia. These are responsible for matters regarding the customary land, Kanak languages and culture, in addition to the customary civil statute, granted to the Kanak people. The Belep chiefdom is united with the others of the north of Grande Terre by its belonging to the large customary area of Hoot ma Waap. Unlike the other seven customary areas comprising Kanaky, Hoot ma Waap is not defined on the basis of language but corresponds to an ancient and complex network of ceremonial relations and warrior and matrimonial alliances which link the region's societies.

<sup>12</sup> See *Shima* (nd) for a collection of articles exploring the concept of the aquapelago and of the related aquapelagic imaginary.

population, the island has continued to be inhabited by ancestors and other spiritual beings that have provided it with a special sacredness. Several myths are located there (Guiart, 2012), and many *cexeen* (sacred) sites are to be found, in Phwoc: for example, north of the island there is the entrance of Chavilun, the underwater 'paradise' where, according to the Kanak, the deceased arrive, following the 'way of the dead', the path in the sea connecting various places in the Kanaky New Caledonia archipelago. The abundance of sea-linked place names, furthermore, is exceptionally rich (Dubois, 1974) and the Belema exhibit great precision in identifying the locations to which the toponyms refer and the mythical paths that connect them. This facet appears to have struck the missionary and ethnologist Marie-Joseph Dubois to such an extent as to spur him to formulate a theory regarding the ancient settlement of the coral platforms surrounding the main islands in the Beleps. He believed that the myths relating to underwater villages actually retained the memory of an age in which those places were above sea level and genuinely inhabited (Dubois, 1985). Indeed, the memory of an ancient time in which the mainland reached out as far as the coral reef still appears in the Belema's stories today.

Places, people, animals and invisible beings are perceived to be connected by underwater pathways that guard the complexity of the relationships between humans and non-humans, between the living and deceased ancestors, between the visible and the invisible, and which recount the origin of the settlement and the present forms of dwelling. The space is represented and witnessed without interruption between land and sea, connecting the coral platforms, the geographical features of the seabed and the land above sea level. Every rock, islet and island from the Daos to the Entrecasteaux atolls are joined by marine paths, according to what could be defined as a concept of 'islandian' space. This is a concept capable of embracing and tackling in a specific way the challenges of modernity and globalisation. Since 2008, six marine areas of New Caledonia, corresponding to 60% of the total surface area of its lagoon and coral reef, have been included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, on account of the extraordinary biodiversity of the ecosystems associated with them (Menu and Hébert, 2007). The process that led to this inclusion implicated the awarding of the Indigenous system of environmental management, which over centuries or, rather, millennia, has preserved the ecological and evolutionary processes at the origin of a probably unparalleled biological diversity. Although not included in the heritage site, the Belep archipelago play a fundamental role in the Great Northern Lagoon conservation, the most extensive of the six sites, representing almost a third of the total surface area of the lagoons of New Caledonia. The management committee with its headquarters in Belep, therefore, has the responsibility of monitoring the conservation of a vast and important zone. The Great Northern Lagoon is also part of the Coral Sea natural park, one of the largest protected marine areas in the world (which attracts illegal fishing boats from Vietnam that the Belema fishermen and the French navy are trying to counter). Furthermore, the *chefferie* (chiefdom) of Belep advances a customary interest also on the Entrecasteaux atolls, lying more than a hundred kilometres north-west of Phwoc. These islands are uninhabited and are unbound by any local administration but traditionally the Belema used to visit them, once a year, to capture turtles and eggs of various species of bird for ceremonial purposes, venturing on a dangerous journey, which was never faced by a single boat alone. Indeed, those were difficult expeditions, due to the distance, the risks involved in crossing the open seas and the winds uncertainty, and for this reason they were accompanied by special ritual attentions. The expeditions were discontinued at the beginning of the 1990s when the last sailing boats also fell into disuse and such a journey became too expensive to be made by the small motorboats that are today used by the Belema. However, in the last few years, some young people keen to harvest sea cucumbers intended for the Asian market, started navigating across the big Northern Lagoon, thus following sea paths traced by their ancestors.

Local fishing, customary uses, socio-political organisations and forms of Indigenous sovereignty actively engage with the massive global investment towards the ocean. The creation of costal Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in 1982,<sup>13</sup>, their extension in 2009, economic interest in underwater resources and ecological interest in ocean biodiversity contribute to a “scramble for the seas”, which is especially dynamic in the Pacific (Le Meur et al, 2018). As islands in the ‘stream’, invested with the global flows and connections, the local societies and culture are, however, able to create original vortices, responding dynamically to events (Favole, 2010). For instance, a scallop fishing project launched by the clans of Belep a few years ago combined the Belema’s customary organisation with the economic support of a public-private corporation and the technical expertise of a specialised company based in Australia, with the aim of starting a durable scallop fishing activity in the Northern Lagoon. The highly sought-after scallops were intended for the luxury Asian market. While the West Pacific Scallops company represented a transposition of a customary structure into an economic one, with the consultation and the collective participation of the clans involved being essential at every stage of activity. Furthermore, traditional rituality was extended to the economic partnership and creatively applied to the main interactions among partners. Through such ventures, the Belema are successfully shaping their relationships in a global world and they are doing so on their own terms, by reviving in original ways their mythical connections to and through the sea, those connections that were disturbed, and even interrupted by colonial and post-colonial hyper-insularity.

### An archipelago of cultural creativity

With any representation of the Belep archipelago on a map, it is not sufficient to position Dau ar and Phwoc at a certain distance from Grande Terre. An “archipelagraphy” would be needed, one that is able to depict the relationships that form the archipelago, “that is, a historiography that considers chains of islands in a fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands and continents” (DeLoughrey, 2001: 23). A jumble of lines would probably emerge, interconnecting more or less distant points, which refer to places (in which time is important as well), in an Indigenous call for alignment of *longue durée* and present. In this entanglement of strands which the archipelago is made up of, “multiple places can be connected via people in a dynamic network of meaningful relations that extend across deep time and vast space” (Teaiwa, 2014: 81). In a relatively recent scholarly move, many disciplines have focused on migration; nonetheless, in the case of Kanaky New Caledonia, and especially the Belep Islands, other ways must be taken into consideration as they are vital to the constitution of contemporary archipelago. The paths interconnecting individuals are one of the ways that guide the Belema activities and movements and thus define the borders of the archipelago.

The image of the path, that is, a horizontal route, conforms to the ‘islandian’ concept of space that combines rooting and mobility and is, in particular, the preferred way of depicting the social relations among the Kanak. These paths are called *daan* in Belep and correspond, at the same time, to the movements of the clans throughout their history and to the lines of force through which the clans themselves are formed and relative to which the individuals are defined (Bensa and Rivierre, 1982). In *daan* the spatial and the temporal facets, the

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<sup>13</sup> Initiated by the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (1982) with a ruling that gave states exclusive access to marine resources around their continental shelf waters (to a distance of 322 kms from their shores).

landscape and the myth are concentrated, producing movement and relationship. *Daan* describes, above all, the relationship with the ancestors through the places they inhabited and where they left their traces. As in the pots aligned for *Dao uvi*, the path displays the genealogical and geographical relationships between the different segments of the clan. Most of the stories of the Belep clans proceed like a pathway; they describe a journey, made of a series of moves, that return the present places of residence in Waala, not only to the *nana pwang*, but to a point of origin, sometimes located in other islands in Oceania. *Nana pwang* are one stage in a series of very specific historical and geographical stages. Moreover, *Daan* represents the past together with future possibility. Indeed, in the Kanak vision 'the past is in front of us, we can see it' and in Belep it is depicted precisely as a line of people in front of the person speaking. The pathway produces a temporal short-circuit whereby the person travelling along it now is (together with) his/her ancestor who originally traced it. Just as yam reproduces by division and outlives itself through its clone, so the ancestor outlives in their descendants, retracing their *daan*. The pathways, the roads traced by the forebears are also the means, the way to operate in the present and to build the future. The success of any undertaking, whether personal or collective, requires the involvement of other people (living or ancestors) through ways that are encoded in the *daan* and are analogous to those with which the groups interact during ceremonial exchanges of the *coutume*. Indeed, with *daan*, the Belema also indicate those people who are found along the path and enable it to be pursued.

In the Belema's stories there is a 'before' and an 'after' the birth of Waala. Nonetheless, in Kanak temporality the moment is always located in the long term. Each event is realigned and superimposed on other previous events, the participants in which (the ancestors) join together with those of the present until they blend in with each other. It is the time of generations, speeches and rites, in which linearity and periodicity meet. The long term reconnects the Kanak of the 21st Century with the Austronesian populations of 3500 years ago, reuniting contemporary global flows to the peopling movement of the Pacific islands. The long term includes change, including change that imposes a full-blown social reorganisation, which gives society a new form, as occurred with the birth of Waala. Indeed, even a similar change emerges into a work of constant remodelling, in which the past and tradition play an active role, supplying the conceptual tools (the *daan*, for example) to transform the present and to imagine the future. This is what Jean-Marie Tjibaou, leader of the independence movement and a leading Kanak intellectual, defined in his speeches as "permanent reformulation". Permanent reformulation is one of the elements of the ability of Oceanian societies to incorporate outside contributions, creating unprecedented creative combinations (Favole, 2010). With regard to "locating cultural creativity," islands and archipelagos provide useful metaphors (Liep, 2001), and this is not by accident. "In Barnett's phrasing (1953: 46), a 'conjuncture of difference' or a process of change in existential conditions that calls for reorientation" (Liep, 2001: 12) seems to characterise the Pacific islands in the present time, making Oceania a vast area of cultural creativity.

Reduced by colonisation, the archipelago of Belep has not disappeared but has been retained in Waala. The village represents a creative and constantly evolving condensation of internal and external forces, and of colonial and Indigenous pressure, that undermines any binary characterisation. In the village, the Belema found an effective way of reassembling the devastated social order after the loss of lands and the redefining of the relative weight of the surviving clans. The deep changes in social organisation and in the relationship to the ancestral lands became visible in the village and were also mediated by the village. The village is a form of organisation that was imposed, but the Belema creatively appropriated it and they have kept it and cared for it to this day. An example of permanent reformulation, Waala



holds together change and continuity, internal and external cultural models, in a complex and captivating summary that contributes to the creation and the creativity of the Belep archipelago.

In conclusion, my proposition is to consider Belep as an archipelago well beyond the physical and geographical referent to which the term itself refers, and more as an archipelago of cultural creativity that unites other ‘islands’. If, for instance, we choose to follow the pathways that the *coutume* establishes, the archipelago of the Beleps takes on a very different aspect than the one that we can allocate to it by looking at an atlas. Belep spreads as far as the north of Grande Terre and reaches Nouméa and Les jardins de Belep in the south. It also touches the other islands in Kanaky New Caledonia, with which it maintains old and new connections, because from there came the ancestors of some of the clans today living in Waala and the ‘blood’ of the clans goes to there: various women have gone to those islands as brides and uterine nephews and nieces have been born there. Belep continues as far as other islands in the Pacific, reached in different ways but nevertheless enshrined by the *coutume*, which initiates a relationship that might remain dormant for years before suddenly being reactivated. Belep even arrives in Europe, following those who for various reasons have moved there. In this manner, other ways of being an archipelago become visible. As Jonathan Pugh recently pointed out:

*Over the past few decades... a range of influential publications have drawn attention to the relational forces, and in particular the archipelagic thinking, which disrupts the static island form. (2018: 93)*

We now can say that there have been relational and archipelagic turns in island studies and that the archipelago has become a powerful tool “to radically recentre positive, mobile, nomadic geopolitical and cultural orderings between and among island(er)s” (Stratford, 2013: 4). Perhaps we can also identify within cultural creativity an additional element that is helpful for understanding that “archipelagos are fluid cultural processes... dependent on changing conditions of articulation or connection” (Stratford et al, 2011: 122).

*You have lived long and time has passed  
The buzzard added  
Don't call the wind that will carry you away  
The gull counseled  
Don't talk to the rain that will drown you  
And the turtledove concluded  
Do not confine to the hut those who inhabit the world.  
Dewe Gorodey (in Waddell et al, 1993: xvi)*

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