

# 57 Fibre skirts and dance battles

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We often speak of traditional culture, but what is traditional? I believe that we still rely on a conception of culture that is too 'archeological'; as if authentic culture were something that must be from the past. On the other hand, all contemporary cultural creation is perceived as if it must be authenticated, perhaps by surviving the test of time. Yet the existential dimension of our patrimony appears thanks to the youth of today—in music and new cultural forms which express not the view points of a hundred years ago, but speak of the sufferings, the joys, of life today.

(Tjibaou 1998:42, trans. Tate LeFevre)

This fibre dance skirt (Figure 257), recorded as being from Ouvéa, made its way into the collections of the British Museum in 1897 via James Edge-Partington, a British traveller and collector. While we don't know if this particular skirt was used before it left the hands of its creators, similar skirts were a basic element of dance costumes worn throughout the Loyalty Islands. In the traditional Kanak societies of the Loyalty Islands and the Grande Terre of New Caledonia, dance, song and instrumental music – what anthropologists might broadly term expressive or performative culture – were not separate from daily life. They served integral roles in Kanak social practice – in the celebration of weddings and births, in marking the passage between youth and adulthood, in training and preparation for war, even in farming and fishing (Ammann 1997). Dancing was not limited to a particular social group, and many dances involved the participation of entire villages.

As in many other Melanesian societies, traditional Kanak ontology understands the individual person as constituted by the network of social relations within which he or she is located. The ongoing maintenance of these relations, primarily through the medium of exchange, is fundamental to the production and reproduction of Kanak persons (and thus Kanak society). Expressive culture, deeply implicated

in everyday Kanak social practice, was both an object and medium of exchange. It thus may not be surprising to note that although certain traditional dances involved ceremonial costumes or sacred paraphernalia, many (such as versions of the *fehoa*) were performed wearing clothing no different from everyday dress (Ammann 1997). Hence, a dance skirt, like this one from the Museum's collection, and an everyday skirt might not always be materially distinguishable.

## Transformations: contemporary Kanak society and the 'Crise de la Jeunesse'

In some ways this century-old object and the cultural heritage we might see it as embodying have little to do with the life of Kanak people today, particularly Kanak youth. French colonialism, modernization and urbanization have transformed the Kanak people. Still under French control, the territory continues to undergo major cultural and political shifts following *les événements*, a period of near civil war between Kanak independantists and French loyalists in the 1980s. Beginning in 1988, a series of political accords ended this period of open violence and began a process of economic and cultural rebalancing between the white French and indigenous Kanak populations. Later agreements called for a New Caledonian 'common destiny', while promising increased





**Figure 257.** A skirt made from vegetable fibre and flying-fox fur. Donated by James Edge-Partington in 1897, from Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands (Oc1897,-.655, length 26 cm).

political autonomy and an eventual referendum on independence from France to be held between 2014 and 2019. Meanwhile, the denizens of this New Caledonian ‘common destiny’ – Kanak youth – a generation too young to have experienced first-hand the cultural and political upheaval of *les événements*, have been deeply affected by the spread of globalized consumer culture and a meteoric rise in migration from rural villages in the north of the Grande Terre and the Loyalty Islands towards Nouméa, the capital city once known as *la ville blanche* (the white city) for its exclusion of Melanesians.

Jobs are scarce in the Loyalty Islands and the north of the Grande Terre, and there are few *lycées* (secondary schools). Thus travelling to Nouméa is, for many young people, the only way to find work or pursue education after the age of fifteen. Yet, when they arrive in Nouméa, young Kanak ‘encounter in their own country, situations [social marginalization, discrimination, unemployment and economic hardship] comparable to those experienced by foreign immigrants in Metropolitan France’ (Barneche 2005:17). At the same time, developing the social and psychological skills necessary for life in Nouméa can be extremely difficult. Many young people end up feeling profoundly lost, isolated and trapped between

two cultures – the individualistic, capitalist modernity of life in an industrialized city and the rural, Melanesian world of their home villages, where sociality remains largely structured around ideas about custom and kinship relations. The resulting marginalization and cultural dislocation experienced by Kanak youth has led to what government institutions and the New Caledonian press now frequently refer to as the *crise de la jeunesse* (youth crisis).

The well-known Caledonian author and teacher Louis-José Barbançon noted:

Urbanization produces new Kanak, cut off from their customary roots, nourished by television, to whom their grandfathers no longer have the time to transmit the messages of the ancestors. Neighbourhood mobs, near the edge of delinquency are forming.

(Barbançon 1992:67, trans. Tate LeFevre)

Simultaneously cut off from the traditional structures of Kanak culture and unable to integrate themselves into Western, urban society, many young Kanak become heavily involved in alcohol and marijuana use, violence and delinquency. As a recent report published by the Customary Senate of New Caledonia explains, such antisocial behaviour increases ‘as young people feel that they have been abandoned by their families, Kanak custom, civil society and all authorities in general’ (Senat



Coutumier 2009:17). The same report asks, with great concern, 'how can these young people project themselves into the future as actors and agents if they cannot succeed in finding their place in a society that oscillates between modernity and tradition?' (ibid.:6).

### **'Not the view points of a hundred years ago, but the sufferings, the joys, of life today': Kanak youth associations**

Despite the grim prognosis of several government institutions, many young people living in Nouméa are finding ways to 'project themselves into the future' and negotiate the 'oscillation between modernity and tradition' that characterizes contemporary Kanak life. For these young people, expressive culture is serving as both object and medium of social relations, in a way not so different than it did when this dance skirt was produced over a century ago. Instead of fibre skirts, however, these young people's dance costumes are oversized board shorts, t-shirts emblazoned with the flag of free Kanaky or Bob Marley, and NY Yankees caps. Within the last five or ten years, grassroots cultural organizations, centred on dance and music production and founded and run by young people, have come to play an increasingly important role in the lives of Kanak youth and the construction of Kanak identity. These groups are primarily based around *Maisons de Quartier* (neighbourhood community centres) in the poorer, largely Kanak neighbourhoods in the outer reaches of Nouméa. They regularly meet to rehearse, perform or just to socialize, but almost none of them have official membership rosters or formal schedules. For young people who are disconnected from customary relationships, unable to find work or who have dropped out of school, these associations provide a structure and the means by which to reaffirm an identity made meaningful by its place in a network of social relations. Though an outsider might watch the hip-hop dance routines or listen to the reggae-influenced music produced by these associations and see a total rupture from Kanak tradition, looking more deeply and listening to young people's own accounts reveals not only cultural transformation but also underlying 'logics of continuity.

### **Artists and identity: the view of young people in youth associations**

Jo, twenty-four, came to Nouméa from Lifou when he was seventeen, to attend secondary school, and now plays keyboard in a Kaneka band made up of members of an association. Kaneka is a highly popular style of contemporary Kanak music developed in the 1980s that fuses traditional Kanak elements with melodic, rhythmic and harmonic features from Western music styles, particularly reggae (Goldsworthy 1998; Ammann 1998). When I asked Jo whether he considered himself to be an artist, he paused for a moment and asked me if by artist I meant someone who was professionally trained or had virtuosic technique. If so, he was not an artist. Instead, he explained:

For me, being an artist it is playing the music that you recognize yourself in. You see ... like the *cap* rhythms of the *fehoa* ... this is what I recognize, right? When I was a child I heard these rhythms ... and those who created those sounds, they were not 'artists' in the way I think you use the word ... but in another sense, the sense that I understand, when old people, in the past – when the grandmothers would sing songs to rock babies to sleep, they sang these songs as artists.

Jo, whose band often combines lyrics about the injustices of French administration with rock chord progressions and *cap* rhythms, sees himself as an artist in the same way.

Involvement in dance groups has equally significant effects on young people's identities. 'Before, we would dance to show our strength and our identity to our enemies in war,' Antoine, twenty-five, and member of a hip-hop dance group from the economically depressed neighbourhood of Rivière-Salée told me. 'In dance now, it is the same thing, we show who we are.' Indeed, the hip-hop dance 'battles' organized several times a year serve as theatres for the presentation of identity among young people. During these battles, members from different groups perform before an audience, each vying for the crowd's applause and recognition of their superior skills. A white French DJ who often helps organize the battles explained to me that he had suggested creating a 'dream team' comprised of members from different dance groups for an upcoming event. However, he complained, everyone was 'too



Figure 258. Kanak hip-hop dancers (photograph by Tate LeFevre, 2009).



connected to their own groups' to agree to his idea. 'Dance crews,' he explained, 'are so clan-like... Being part of one becomes a source of peoples' whole identity.'

Many young Kanak people who would otherwise be socially unmoored, come to structure their identities through participation in these dance groups. As Hassan, the leader of another group explained, 'If I wasn't doing this, I would probably be a delinquent.' Even government institutions have begun to recognize the important social role dance groups play. The Tjibaou Cultural Centre held the first-ever New Caledonian festival of hip-hop in 2009, and Nouméa's Director of Culture and Festivals recently told New Caledonia's daily newspaper that, 'Learning to channel one's energies, to organize oneself and express one's artistic potential – these are all virtues that we can attribute to hip-hop dance.' ('Planète hip-hop', *Les Nouvelles Caledoniennes*, 14 February 2008).

Young people involved in dance and music production in Nouméa often emphasize that no matter what they do, or what they create, Kanak identity is *avant tout* (before everything). As Jo, the Kaneka keyboardist, explained, 'All the music I create, and in some ways everything I do, it all connects back to culture... Kanak culture is always at the base.' Jo began using his fingers to tap out a *cap* (Kanak rhythm used in most traditional dances) on the table we were sitting at. Then he started singing *Buffalo Soldiers* by Bob Marley over the beat. He laughed and continued, 'You know the saying "all roads lead to Rome?" For us, all roads lead to Kanak culture.' And in this sense, the road separating a fibre dance skirt in a museum from dance battles and reggae music is not so long as it might appear.