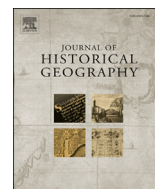




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## Nationalism and reconciliation in memorial landscapes: the commemoration of Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Kanaky/New Caledonia



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## ABSTRACT

A politician, priest, academic, chief and freedom fighter, Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936–1989) is one of the most prominent figures in New Caledonian history. How Tjibaou has been memorialized, and the implications of the way in which his legacy is commemorated, has received little analysis in the context of New Caledonia's ongoing debate over sovereignty. Tjibaou was a political icon who promoted indigenous Kanak cultural cohesion and (re)definition as an essential step in the process of independence from France. Interviews, visual analysis and secondary sources were used to identify the extent to which Tjibaou's views about Kanak identity, nationalism and reconciliation are presented in memorials dedicated to him. Together, the examples of anti-colonial Kanak national identity and reconciliation in these memorials exemplify the complexity of Tjibaou's role in New Caledonian politics and reflect the broader changes in Kanak power and France's reaction to the growing push for independence.

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Memorials commemorating influential leaders are frequently subjected to appropriation and reinterpretation by contemporary actors to justify their own agendas. For example, Alderman has argued that street names dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr. are used to counter African American exclusion in the United States, and Marschall has suggested that post-apartheid commemoration in South Africa created an heroic memorial landscape designed to mobilize a new sense of national identity.<sup>1</sup> These examples of 'reputational politics' explore the 'socially constructed and contested nature' of memorials and the 'discursive rivalries' implicit in the process of commemorating leaders' legacies.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I approach the memorial sites of an anti-colonial political leader as both 'texts' and 'arenas' that promote certain indigenous voices while excluding other communities as part of a broader effort to gain greater political and economic autonomy and social equality.<sup>3</sup>

The indigenous people in New Caledonia, the Kanak, have long

sought independence from France. However, an essential criterion for sovereignty is establishing a distinct national identity that shows the international community that the indigenous group is a nation, not a minority, and that, while distinct, they are willing to cooperate with their neighbours on development.<sup>4</sup> Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936–1989) was a leader within the Kanak community and a proponent of independence. His ideology and actions continue to shape New Caledonia's interactions with France and other Melanesian states.<sup>5</sup> For Tjibaou, the path to independence required the emergence of a distinct Kanak identity that would both mobilize and empower oppressed Kanak and support reconciliation between Kanak communities and French-Caledonians. Unfortunately, his attempts to construct a unified Kanak national identity that could strengthen the push for independence could not overcome violent inter-tribal divisions and the threat of further conflict. Conflicts that led, in 1989, to Tjibaou's assassination.

In the decades following his death three memorials have been dedicated to Tjibaou: his grave, a work of commemorative graffiti at

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<sup>1</sup> D.H. Alderman, Street names as memorial arenas: the reputational politics of commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia county, *Historical Geography* 30 (2002) 99–120; S. Marschall, Commemorating 'struggle heroes': constructing a genealogy for the new South Africa, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12 (2006) 176–193.

<sup>2</sup> Alderman, Street names as memorial arenas, 100.

<sup>3</sup> O.J. Dwyer and D.H. Alderman, Memorial landscapes: analytic questions and metaphors, *Geojournal* 73 (2008) 166.

<sup>4</sup> J. Barker, *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, Lincoln, 2005; E. Kowal, The politics of the gap: indigenous Australians, liberal multiculturalism, and the end of the self-determination era, *American Anthropologist* 110 (2008) 338–348.

<sup>5</sup> A. Bensa and E. Wittersheim, Nationalism and independence: the political thought of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *The Contemporary Pacific* 10 (1997) 369–390. Tjibaou is pronounced phonetically as Chee-bow.

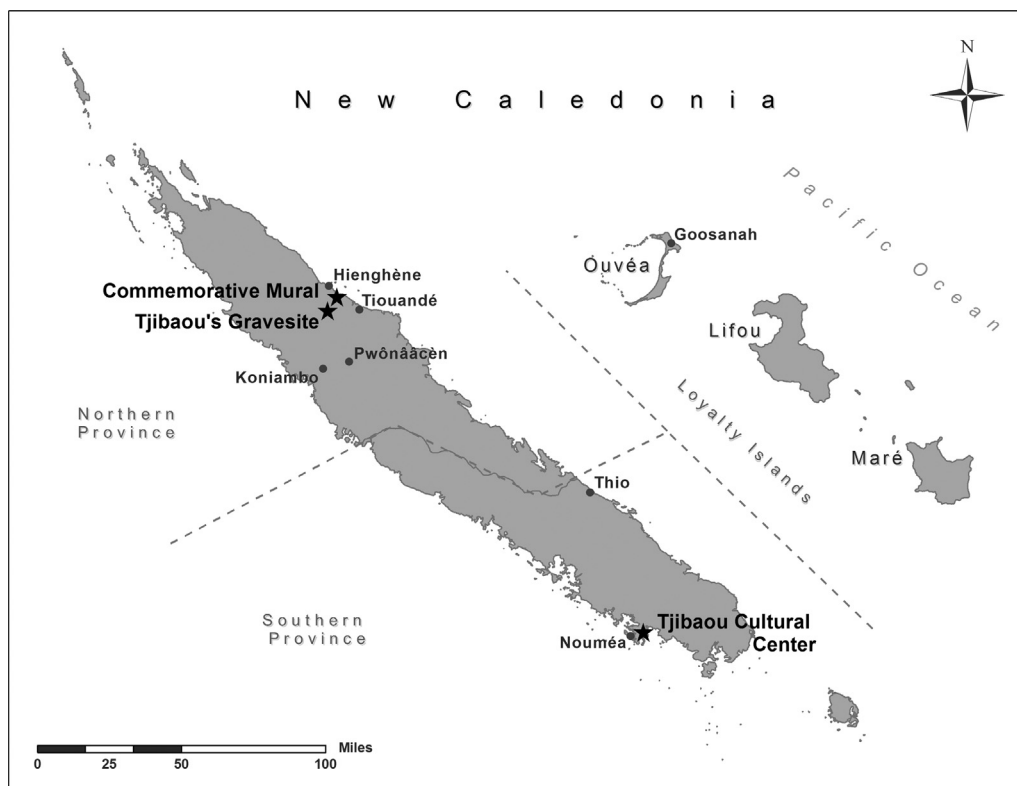


Fig. 1. Locations of Memorials to Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Map compiled by Andrea Széll.

Hienghène in the Northern Province of New Caledonia, and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in the capital city, Nouméa (see Fig. 1). Designed and constructed by either Tjibaou's family or the French state, these memorials only encapsulate part of his legacy. The memorials exemplify Lüsebrink's argument that the commemoration of 'heroic leaders' can be used to create counter-hegemonic narratives within a postcolonial understanding of history.<sup>6</sup> Through interviews, visual and textual analysis, and secondary sources, this article examines how the three memorials dedicated to Tjibaou have been used to reaffirm indigenous Kanak national identity in response to the ongoing struggle for sovereignty, but have failed to produce reconciliation between Kanak and non-Kanak communities.

### Jean-Marie Tjibaou and the rise of the independence movement

Tjibaou was a significant figure in the rise of Kanak nationalism, and in the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) party in New Caledonia. He adopted a very different approach to New Caledonian independence than many of his contemporaries; one that focused on anti-colonial Kanak nationalism, cultural identity and reconciliation rather than the Foulards Rouges' strategy of independence at all costs, 'radical ethnic mobilization' and 'direct confrontation'.<sup>7</sup> As Message argues, 'he believed that if

Kanaks worked toward unified expressions of culture, identity, and a progressive version of tradition that was not at odds with contemporary culture, they would be able to achieve political power more effectively than through any policy of direct action or further violence'.<sup>8</sup> Tjibaou's lifelong struggle to promote Kanak identity and New Caledonian sovereignty was rooted in having a politically active father, Tjibaou's own struggle to maintain his cultural identity, his relationship with the Catholic Church, his time in seminaries and at university in France, and the political events of the 1980s in New Caledonia.

Born into a prominent New Caledonian family, Tjibaou's parents were members of two powerful chieftaincies in Hienghène, a village in the Northern Province. From an early age he was predisposed to politics and the Catholic Church. His father and a priest who was close to the family were dedicated to the Union des Indigènes Calédoniens Amis de la Liberté dans l'Ordre, an organization that ignited the modern indigenous movement in New Caledonia.<sup>9</sup> Tjibaou was encouraged to pursue a career as a priest or a religious teacher, and for more than ten years he studied at a number of Catholic schools and seminaries in New Caledonia. At the end of his studies he went to visit his family in Hienghène. There he realized that he had forgotten how to speak his native language. This pivotal moment would have an immeasurable effect on Tjibaou's commitment to a cultural renaissance among Kanak and would underpin his efforts to establish a Kanak identity.

Like many of his peers, Tjibaou spent several years in the late 1960s studying in France before returning to New Caledonia in the

<sup>6</sup> H.J. Lüsebrink, *Geschichtskultur im (post-)kolonialen Kontext*, in: A. Assmann, H. Friese (Eds), *Identitäten: Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität* 3, Frankfurt, 1999, 417–418.

<sup>7</sup> E. Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanak Witness to the World: An Intellectual Biography*, Honolulu, 2008, 77; D. Chappell, *The Kanak Awakening of 1969–1976: radicalizing anti-colonialism in New Caledonia*, *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 117 (2002) 187–202.

<sup>8</sup> K. Message, *Contested sites of identity and the cult of the new: the Centre Cultural Tjibaou and the constitution of culture in New Caledonia*, *reCollections* 1 (2006) 13, available at [http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol\\_1\\_no\\_1/papers/contested\\_sites](http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_1_no_1/papers/contested_sites). Last accessed 21 January 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou*.

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