



Figure 1. Exterior of Centre Culture Tjibaou, from traditional gardens and Kanak path  
photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

# Contested sites of identity and the cult of the new

the Centre Culturel Tjibaou and the constitution of culture in New Caledonia

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## Abstract

The forward-looking ideology of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou has enabled it to engage both with new museums globally and with the political and social objectives associated with New Caledonia's independence struggles of the 1980s. I explore the features of the cultural centre: its relationship with the French Government, its juggling of tradition and modernity, and the multitude of varying responses that the centre has

received since its opening in 1998.

I argue that the centre has itself become an important and progressive — albeit highly complicated — symbol for a territory undergoing change, and that by looking at how these discussions occur both within and in relation to the centre, we can clearly identify the role that museums play in the constitution of culture.

## Introduction

Opened in Nouméa in 1998, the Centre Culturel Tjibaou (CCT) provides a spectacular example of the ‘new museum’ that has attracted critical and popular interest over the last decade. Designed by Renzo Piano in consultation with the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture (ADCK), the centre comprises an interconnected series of ten stylised *grandes cases* (chiefs’ huts), which form three villages (covering an area of 6060 square metres). These huts have an exposed stainless-steel structure and are constructed of iroko, an African rot-resistant timber which has faded over time to reveal a silver patina evocative of the coconut palms that populate the coastline of New Caledonia.

The CCT draws materially and conceptually on its geopolitical environment, so that despite being situated on the outskirts of the capital city (on the main island, known as Grand Terre), it draws influence from the diverse Kanak communities residing elsewhere across the New Caledonian islands. The circling pathway that leads from the car park to the centre’s entrance is lined with plants from various regions of New Caledonia. Together, these represent the myth of the creation of the first human: the founding hero, Téâ Kanaké. Signifying the collaborative design process, the path and centre are organically interconnected so it is difficult to discern any discrete edges existing between the building and gardens. Similarly, the soaring huts appear unfinished as they open outward to the sky, projecting the architect’s image of Kanak culture as flexible, diasporic, progressive and resistant to containment by traditional museological spaces. Reflecting on the design process,

Piano explains:

It dawned on me that one of the fundamental elements of Kanak architecture is the very construction process: ‘building the House’ is every bit as important as ‘the finished House’. From this, I began to develop the concept of a permanent ‘building work-site’, or rather of a place which would suggest an unfinished house-building project.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I suggest that the centre presents an ‘unfinished’, transformative effect to reflect its ongoing commitment to an image of newness. This effect provides the centre with features associated with contemporary museums across the world, showing its fluency in postmodern architectural discourse as well as its ability to perform as a significant cultural actor on a global stage. While this encourages a steady flow of international visitors interested in the centre’s spectacular architecture and its programs, the constant reiteration of the new is tied to the specific political objective of reconciliation between coloniser and colonised. Fundamentally connected to the CCT’s founding mandate, the ideology of the new is more than dogmatic. It is used to produce convincing symbols of national identity for a state undergoing a process of political transition, and aims to evoke a real interest and investment in an evolving public culture. The CCT’s desire to be new can thus be seen to accord with its role in domestic and international affairs, and as indicating, above all else, the need for a clear articulation of cultural politics in New Caledonia, as well as the inseparability of these terms.



Figure 2. Exterior of CCT, from traditional gardens and Kanak path

photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

## The Centre Culturel Tjibaou and new museums

The CCT embodies many of the key components and features that have become identified with a shift in the way that museums are conceptualised in the Western world. This movement away from a more traditional museological approach has quickly resulted in a series of differences in the ways that museums are designed, made, experienced, and understood to function.<sup>2</sup> Often presented as interdisciplinary sites of postmodernity, where subjectivity is presented as contextual and contingent rather than static, new museums may also challenge the continued relevance and role of the nation-state and its boundaries in a contemporary, globalised context.<sup>3</sup> This approach has been adopted to greater or

lesser degrees by high profile museum projects developed in the last decade, including the Museum of Sydney (1995), the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (1998) and the National Museum of Australia (2001).<sup>4</sup> These museums have conveyed similar characteristics and approaches toward exhibition-making. Key features include the incorporation of a self-conscious approach to representation, a heightened political awareness that is informed by postcolonial theories, a unique building that is designed by a high profile architect, and the desire to encourage direct community involvement in relation to the generation of ideas about culture, and the interlinked production of discussions about cultural identity. These elements contribute significantly to producing an image of newness or difference for the museum. In seeking to describe the CCT, Margaret Jolly also comments on the impact of these features:

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre is unsurpassed in the Pacific for its architectural splendour and its expensive high-tech virtuosity. It sustains a singular stress on contemporary Pacific arts rather than the curating and display of older objects ... There are about thirty older artefacts in the Bwenaado house (mainly masks, houseposts, and roof sculptures on loan from European museums), but most older Kanak artefacts are still housed in the Territorial Museum of New Caledonia in town. The emphasis in the Ngan Jila (house of riches) is rather on contemporary works by named artists in both indigenous and introduced genres. According to Emmanuel Kasarhérou, this is faithful to Tjibaou's vision of Kanak culture not as frozen in the past, but as open and lived in.<sup>5</sup>

More generally, new museums are often described as physically new institutions that are dedicated to the exhibition of cultural objects, artefacts and experiences. They are often associated with large-scale publicly funded capital works projects, and may be exemplified by the Guggenheim industry in general and the associated urban renewal and infrastructure program of the previously struggling industrial region of Bilbao in particular — whereby images of the rejuvenated Spanish city present the Frank Gehry-designed Museo Guggenheim Bilbao (1997) as larger than life, overshadowing other more everyday urban spaces.<sup>6</sup> They emphasise interactive and multimedia modes of display to enhance this image of newness, and highlight the technological innovation (and ‘expensive high-tech virtuosity’) of their architecture. They tend to combine cultural history exhibitions with contemporary arts, often inciting controversy on the basis of their apparently incongruous approaches to exhibition, or because of their perceived privileging of popular culture and entertainment over ‘high’ culture. They frequently function as a site for community festivals and other cultural activities. Aiming to attract a wide and diverse audience, they often deploy alternative modes of history and storytelling, non-linear and multiplicitous narratives and a postcolonial dedication to the politics of authorship, governance and authority.<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, the CCT can be understood as the ideal example of this new museum model because while it conforms so closely with the principles and effects also used by many other examples worldwide, it does this for reasons that are very clearly connected to its local context, and with the conditions and reasons for its production. This means that although the architecture is breathtaking and eminently suitable for the global marketplace of postcard photography

and tourist imagery, its exhibitions and programs engage both with the complexity within Kanak communities and the broader geo-political context of New Caledonia. For instance, while its main exhibition spaces include the growing permanent collection of contemporary Kanak and Oceanian art displayed in the Bérétara Hall and Jinu House, traditional objects of Kanak heritage on loan from the Musée de l’Homme in Paris are exhibited in the Bwénaado House. It also hosts temporary exhibitions such as *Impressions Pacifique: Estampes contemporaines* (2005) which was the result of collaboration between the CCT and the Centre Culturel Goa Ma Bwarhat in Hienghène, and which aimed to produce inter-regional partnerships.<sup>8</sup> It promotes engagement by rural Kanak communities through outreach programs that include artists’ workshops and ingenious ‘Travelling Educational Kits’ which are folded-up, suitcase-sized models of the cultural centre, its grounds and its activities. These are taken to schools and community centres to show the cultural centre and its activities, to demonstrate the relationship between Kanak architecture and Renzo Piano’s stylised building, and to encourage children to participate in the visual arts. It has a well-resourced library and digital catalogue that facilitate access to, and the preservation of, Kanak cultural heritage (particularly the remaining 25 languages spoken across the islands).<sup>9</sup> The CCT encourages interaction with other cultural centres and museums in the Pacific region (through agencies such as the Pacific Islands Museums Association and institutions including the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, with which it discusses issues including the preservation of intangible heritage and language), and promotes dialogue between New Caledonia and museums and other cultural institutions in France and other countries.

These programs reflect the centre's official primary purpose as expressed in its mission statement, to 'promote and preserve the Kanak archaeological, anthropological and linguistic heritage'.<sup>10</sup> This shows the CCT to be concerned with creating a very particular relationship with the postcolonial politics of image-construction — a point which is significant in relation to the centre's official publicity and rhetoric, as well as for the Kanak communities that it aims principally to represent and engage with. The CCT may be seen to provide an official site for testing and holding dialogue and debate over what kinds of images and ideas may be appropriate signifiers of a renewed cultural identity for New Caledonians as the country continues to negotiate its future direction.<sup>11</sup>

Before the centre opened, the ADCK stated:

The intention is not to make a static presentation of works as in a conventional museum but to make available to be seen, to be admired and, it will be said, 'to live again', objects that have become what the Elders have termed 'ambassadors of Kanak culture' throughout the world.<sup>12</sup>

These objects are part of the 'dispersed Kanak heritage' that exists in museums and collections globally. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, the cultural director of the CCT, explains that an inventory was taken in the 1980s of the objects belonging to Kanak heritage that were acquired during and since the contact period by Western collectors and museums. In the consultations that followed between the Kanak Cultural, Scientific and Technical Board (the organisation that preceded the ADCK) and Kanak communities, it was decided that the centre would not actively seek the return of these objects, many of which have spent up to 150 years away from New Caledonia (and which, according to

traditional beliefs, may be dangerous if the conditions of acquisition are unknown). Instead, they would be considered 'ambassadors' of Kanak culture, employed to 'let the rest of the world know that Kanaks exist'.<sup>13</sup> The CCT is, however, committed to ongoing discussion about how these objects are conserved and displayed overseas. It is also involved in curatorial projects such as the exhibition of traditional Kanak art, *De jade et de nacre patrimoine artistique kanak*, which travelled from Nouméa to the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris in 1990–1991 (prior to the centre's opening). Objects from Western collections also visit the CCT, housed for temporary periods in the Bwénaado House, where they are accompanied by a computer monitor that provides further information about how they relate to traditional Kanak systems of cultural heritage. Notably, the CCT also conducts exchanges with European museums that seek their advice when mounting exhibitions of Kanak work. In a recent case, the CCT sent two Kanak carvers to a regional museum in the south-west of France to show by demonstration and discussion how the sculptures in their collection had traditionally been made.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the issue of repatriation, there are other differences between traditional western style museums and the CCT. Kasarhérou — who used to be the director of the Territorial Museum in Nouméa, a traditional, western-style ethnographic museum with rich collections of Pacific heritage — has engaged with this matter at length.<sup>15</sup> In 1989 (the year President Mitterrand approved development of the CCT to be built as 'headquarters' for the ADCK) he participated in a workshop held in Papua New Guinea designed to explore the changing role of museums and cultural centres in the Pacific. At this time, he explained:

In New Caledonia many people think that a museum must keep the past but should not exhibit it. Another explanation of our difficulties in attracting Kanak visitors is their fear of entering a place where artefacts of the past are displayed. They feel as if they were entering a cemetery where devils live. The matter however must not be forced, attitudes will change gradually. The only thing to do, is to explain why it is important for the future of our cultures to have a museum. We must explain why museums did not exist in the past and why they are important nowadays ...<sup>16</sup>

In this same forum, the Director of the National Museum and Art Gallery of Papua New Guinea, Soroi Eoe, similarly suggested that this may be a dominant perception amongst Pacific Island cultures, where museum collections are perceived as 'little more than odd assortments of exotic curios ... This view was and still is reinforced by the conviction that museums are only partly the emanations of an indigenous cultural personality: they do not really meet the needs of the great majority of indigenous Pacific islanders'.<sup>17</sup> As one measure of the CCT's success as a social actor within the local community, it seems that both the CCT and the Territorial Museum now attract larger numbers of Kanak visitors and culture workers than was the case in the late 1980s. Expanding its own agenda from ethnography to include social history and current issues, the Territorial Museum now hosts contemporary events such as *EXPO — La Violence, tu sais ce qu'on lui dit?* (2005). These examples suggest that the 'new museum' paradigm might be more indebted to the practices of 'museum-like' spaces — such as the French lineage of cultural centres and eco-museums — than to traditional ethnographic museums.<sup>18</sup>

It also shows that by expanding their focus to include an interest in contemporary culture, new museums, cultural centres and other exhibitionary sites in New Caledonia are also playing a part in attempting to bring to fruition Tjibaou's dream that the country would one day be 'irrigated' with 'small cultural centres that would be heritage conservation centres and places for contemporary creativity'.<sup>19</sup>

## The political culture and personality cult of Jean-Marie Tjibaou

The focus on open configurations, representational strategies, and the general commitment to achieving a convincing, ongoing effect of newness is important for new museums at the level of novelty, as a way to keep audiences coming back and to continually attract others. In the case of the CCT, the dedication to forward-looking



Figure 3. Jean-Marie Tjibaou statue  
photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel  
Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop,  
Architectes



Figure 4. Looking over the CCT from Tjibaou statue  
 photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

and non-constant images of identity and culture also emerged as a direct extension of the ideology of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, after whom the centre was named. Leader of the dominant, pro-independence Union Calédonienne party, Tjibaou was revolutionary in his belief that political strength would emerge as a by-product of cultural pride. In a widely quoted statement, he argues that ‘[t]he return to tradition is a myth ... No people has ever achieved that. The search for identity, for a model: I believe it lies ahead of us ... Our identity lies ahead of us’.<sup>20</sup> Tjibaou rejected the idea that Kanaks must become ‘black Frenchmen’ in order to achieve power or authority, and he envisaged ‘a peaceful resolution of the settler–native confrontation, as long as Kanaks could face France with “a firm personality”, meaning a self-confident identity rooted in culture and history’.<sup>21</sup> He is remembered by many for being, at least in his later years, moderate and

reformist — especially in the wake of the ethnic insurgencies that had taken place throughout the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> 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. Tjibaou’s pointed inter-implication of culture and politics was strategic and relevant, and responded to the fact that historically, culture has often been the ground on which Kanaks have been persecuted or attacked by the settler community.<sup>23</sup>

Tjibaou argued that ‘to show one’s culture is to show that one exists ... There is no cultural phenomenon that doesn’t have an institutional and therefore political impact’.<sup>24</sup> Presenting itself as an actor that contributes in concrete ways to social (and possibly political) change, the CCT was

designed to embody the intent to formulate a renewed national iconography that is socially progressive as well as culturally sustaining. Despite the sophistication of this objective, it has been writ large in the massive bronze statue of Tjibaou himself that is located atop a nearby hill peak. From here Tjibaou, dressed partly in western attire and partly in chiefly garb, oversees his realm, which extends beyond the CCT to encompass the countryside around the city of Nouméa. The statue's privileged location and pose confirm that the centre was envisaged as both 'the recognition of Kanak culture and the souvenir of Jean-Marie Tjibaou'.<sup>25</sup> Determinedly social realist in style, the statue reveals the potential dangers associated with the desire to produce urgently reconfigured national symbols by promoting the personality cult of Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Indeed, the specific problem here, according to Peter Brown, is that '[i]n the postmodern age of multiple identities, the search to promote a particular cultural or ethnic identity seems to be a utopian if not regressive gesture, when it is not simply rhetorical and tactical'.<sup>26</sup> And yet, as Brown also notes, 'this cult is also a subtle shift in significance, as Tjibaou the politician calling for independence is replaced by the image of the promoter of his culture'.<sup>27</sup> This shift in strategy — whereby the political is overlaid with the cultural, rather than positioned in opposition to it — has formed the framework for the CCT and for events contributing to its development, including the important Melanesia 2000 festival, organised by Tjibaou and held on the site of the CCT in 1975. The festival was designed to invest the culture of politics with 'the art of life',<sup>28</sup> so that 'Kanak political culture' could become a more unified and effective force that had a clearer understanding of its relationship with traditional culture and custom. As 'the first great urban cultural

demonstration of Kanak culture' that was held in '*Nouméa-la-Blanche*' (white Nouméa), the festival 'aimed at a global representation of the Kanak world and for a unified vision, yet without eliminating the particularities of each of its constituents'.<sup>29</sup> It sparked a cultural renaissance.

A key figure of support for Tjibaou's legacy throughout the period leading up to the production of the CCT was Alban Bensa. An anthropologist at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and principal advisor to Renzo Piano, Bensa reiterated Tjibaou's fear that Kanaks would be relegated to the 'prehistoric' (categorised according to stereotyped historical images).<sup>30</sup> He thus advocated a forward-looking ideology that avoided the depiction — and definition — of Kanaks in relation to past images only, where they can have no current agency, political or otherwise. Bensa's role as advisor to the project clearly had implications in the way it came to be realised. He argued strongly against the simple reconstitution of a traditional Kanak village, which would have been either picturesque or kitsch (with demonstrable links to the Kanak villages displayed at French colonial expositions in 1889 and 1931).<sup>31</sup> He also rallied against building the centre as a theme park-like and overly saturated media-enriched environment (like the Polynesian Cultural Centre in Hawaii). In recommending against a 'regionalist replica' style of design, and in rejecting the straightforward incorporation of history into the project, Bensa argued for development of what would become a paradoxical collection of international and global features, and regional references and tensions.<sup>32</sup> While this illustrates a rejection of history that is closely connected to the cult of the new in general terms (and reveals the favouring of newness that is the condition of new museums everywhere), what is unique in regard to the CCT is the



relationship that this had with Tjibaou's guiding philosophy of newness and regeneration.<sup>33</sup>

## The constitution of culture in New Caledonia: tradition, modernity and *les grands travaux*

Renzo Piano was commissioned to design the new CCT after winning a competition that was administered by the ADCK and judged by an international panel of architects and other experts (that included the President of ADCK, Marie-Claude Tjibaou, the Head of New Zealand's Maori Affairs Department, Tia Barrett, an Australian anthropologist, Marcia Langton, and the Director of the Solomon Islands National Museum, Lawrence Foanoata). The appointment process reflects the desire to project an image of New Caledonia that is

progressive and forward-looking. The choice of Piano, which was internationally lauded, provided those involved with a sense of optimism that the CCT might achieve the effect and status of a *grand travaux* (great work), as well as the creation of a renewed and visible concrete symbol of unification, which was regarded at the time as an urgent task.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, before construction of the new CCT began, the President of France, Francois Mitterrand, decreed that it was to be one of the French state's most important undertakings. It was to be the first of an elite group of significant institutions, known collectively as 'the Great Projects of the Republic', to be invested in or built outside of France.<sup>35</sup> Other 'Great Projects' in Paris include the Pyramid of the Louvre, the arch at la Défense, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The CCT benefited further from the popular 'hearts, minds and pockets' policies of the current French President Jacques Chirac in his two years



Figure 5. Looking from Kanak path into the Péruï House and cafeteria area  
photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes



Figure 6. **Third village, including the Mâlep House** photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

as Prime Minister in the 1980s, so that the French Government not only covered the \$90 million initially required for building the CCT but agreed to support substantially the ongoing administration costs of the site.<sup>36</sup>

Given these rich expectations and resources, the CCT aimed to bridge the gap between the apparently conflicting aspirations of the French Government and the desire by activists to achieve a new and independent state of Kanaky. This struggle over nationhood is represented in a biographical exhibit dedicated to the life and works of Jean-Marie Tjibaou. This demonstrates the *'entanglement* of Kanak and French culture, even as it documented the racism of the French and the violence of New Caledonia's colonial history'.<sup>37</sup> Located in the Mâlep House (*mâlep* means 'to live' in the *yâlayu* language), the display includes photographic and textual narrative

sections under the headings: 'his land, his loved ones', 'serving others, the priesthood and community works', 'a political vision based on Kanak culture', and 'the Kanak leader opens the way to a common destiny'. Appropriate to Tjibaou's dream for Kanak culture to resist becoming caught in the past or rendered as static, very few objects are included. As objects that correspond directly to the as yet unattained future independent state, a 'Government de Kanaky — FLNKS' stamp, the flag of Kanaky, and Jean-Marie Tjibaou's case and passport are shown in one section. No text explains the significance of this arrangement (that would perhaps be obvious to New Caledonians), yet it refers to an important occasion in 1985 when Tjibaou went to Paris and introduced himself as the head of the provisional government of Kanaky.<sup>38</sup>

Bensa, who saw the CCT as 'a new opportunity to carry forward the political struggle on the cultural and symbolical front where Jean-Marie Tjibaou had so wished it could also develop', also promoted these aspirations for unification under a centralised independent state.<sup>39</sup> He understood that the building had to be convincing in a symbolic sense, as well as impressive and effective in terms of the contribution it could make to the more pragmatic development of cultural confidence in Kanak communities. It needed to provide Kanaks with an emblem of cultural identity that was optimistic, contemporary and open enough to be interpreted and appropriated widely. More than anything else, it needed to embody a promise for the future. Kasarhérou describes the resultant building in the following terms:

For the main part of JMTCC [CCT], Piano has incorporated the Kanak concept of a central avenue aligned with groups of *grand case* (Kanak chiefs' houses). However Piano has translated this form, giving it a

profound new expression: the circular structures of the *grand case* soar up to thirty metres in height but they are not thatched nor are the walls fully clad. Reminiscent of (Kanak) houses but opening onto a dream of the future, they have a feeling of incompleteness, bringing to mind that Kanak culture itself is not static but is always open to change.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to providing a physical manifestation of the ideological principles motivating development of the centre, Kasarhérou explains that Piano's building aspires to the principles of a pure architectural modernism, so that the structure appears to lift ephemerally up and away from the ground around it. Piano himself says, 'while the form of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre may have nothing to do with local constructions, it has their spirit, without denying anything of my own modernity'.<sup>41</sup> Further registering a break between the traditions of Western architectural practice and the cultural practice of the Kanak communities for whom the centre was designed, it has also been reported that Kanak visitors seem to be most interested in and respond most positively to the ground area surrounding the building, where some communities maintain traditional gardens.<sup>42</sup> Instead of seeking a direct relationship with its immediate landscape, however, Piano chose to centralise universalising symbols such as the atmosphere or air, and the passing breeze. His emblems of identity for the future stretch upward and away from the ground that is occupied by the participating Kanak communities. In association with the airy and expansive exhibition spaces inside the buildings, the structure manifests a beauty that challenges rather than replicates the way that the traditional (closed and exclusivist) power structures of Kanak culture have been

reproduced in traditional modes of building. It supports a global image of indigenous architecture, or the revisioning of indigenous architecture according to a renewed globalised genre; and yet simultaneously rewrites the traditional pedagogical non-western style of authority.<sup>43</sup> Consistently with this, the building appears to privilege a particular version of contemporary Kanak cultural practice that is connected to ideas of progress and development implicit within Piano's centralised Western position.<sup>44</sup> In his critique of the building, Brown quotes from Bensa to suggest that the processes of over-inscription (of both the architectural surfaces and the ways of talking about the building) have replaced the traditionally articulated form of closure with the projected illusion of 'a non-discriminatory and "democratic" openness, in this building [that has been] commissioned and underwritten by a modern Western European state'.<sup>45</sup> In appointing Piano and building the project according to an international style of modernism (which links both typologically and genealogically back to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris), the CCT manipulates architecture 'to appropriate the spatial power base of an old [privileged Western] regime for use in the identity formation of a new one'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the CCT's status as a 'great project' evidences how:

the modern era of nation-states calls for multiple allegiances and alliances, often to be upheld across great distances. Especially in cases where single states encompass multiple would-be-ethnic nations, architectural and urbanistic efforts to articulate a single 'national identity' are deeply controversial ... [this reflects] the need to extend international identity through staking some new claim to noteworthy modernity ...<sup>47</sup>

This brings us back to the anachronistic bronze statue of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, and to the risks associated with such overtly singular and non-compromising symbols of nationhood. The primary difficulty with Piano's building is that it appears literally to seek transcendence from its present location, while at the same time it offers to overlay an international kind of architecture into the local context. This integration provides a reinscription of the local custom and culture, not by local Kanaks, but by Piano and his advisers (that is due also, in part at least, to the limited consultation that preceded building).<sup>48</sup> Brown's critique is not directed toward Piano's referencing of customary Kanak huts per se, but at his attempt to tweak the politics internal to them. He is concerned that at a symbolic level, Piano's design 'updates' the huts so they fit more comfortably within a European image of social modernity and progress (and as modelled in exemplary form by the Centre Georges Pompidou).

Piano's imprint of unified progress and optimism for the future might thus be interpreted as problematically illustrating a direct connection to the French Government's plan to reflect the ideologies and interests of the 'modern' nation-state of France as the commissioning agency and overriding authority.<sup>49</sup> In this case, the modernist architecture may be understood — possibly too simplistically — as signifying a very specific political statement (keeping in mind that although Piano had won a competition held to find the best designer for the project, he already had a particular history with French institutions and government, having designed the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1977 with Richard Rogers). Not only is the Pompidou Centre an explicit symbol of social progress and an icon of modernity, but it is also widely accepted as the prototype of the new

museum model — a point made evident by the architects' intention to 'create a new kind of public forum, a non-monumental building of such infinite flexibility that it would be in constant process. The structure's interdisciplinary organisation was supposed to democratise the arts'.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps Piano's popularity was connected to this prior experience of designing 'populist' buildings that constitute 'anti-monuments'. As the most famous of these, the Pompidou Centre has become connected to, and symbolic of, Paris despite the architects' intention to provide a space that rejected the pedagogical structure and traditional hierarchies of art museums. If we compare the intention toward and effect presented by the Pompidou Centre and the CCT, we can see that not only does the CCT succeed in reflecting an image of New Caledonia that is democratic-looking and progressive in outlook, but that it appears to offer a symbolic (if not thematic) synchronicity with the ideological grandeur and impressive scale of the Pompidou Centre. By asking why it was that a self-consciously new and internationalist style of museum was selected for the purpose of representing Kanak culture, it may be possible to evaluate whether the CCT as a new museum can possibly live up to the rhetorical claims made on its behalf. In epitomising key characteristics of the new museum so effectively, the CCT may ultimately offer an internationally palatable monument for consumption by audiences from outside New Caledonia. If this is the case, it might confirm Claude Patriat's argument that 'out of all democratic countries, the French nation has taken furthest the assertion of an active political presence in the cultural field' as a way to ensure its authority.<sup>51</sup>

## The desire for *rééquilibrage* (rebalancing): history, politics and independence

And yet, because of the competing political and economic pressures historically at play within New Caledonia, it is simply not possible to separate the global from the local in the context of the CCT. This means that while an international audience may well have been considered primary for the centre's success, it was also the result of local political action. Specifically, the decision to construct a forward-looking cultural centre dedicated to the preservation and continued development of Kanak cultural traditions emerged out of the obligation of the Matignon (and Oudinot) Accords (1988) to work toward achieving a degree of political and economic self-autonomy for Kanaks in New Caledonia. In signing this agreement, the French Government undertook 'to provide for the expression and fulfilment of the Melanesian personality in all its forms' and, 'to ensure that everyone has access to information and culture'.<sup>52</sup> The accords were seen as a way of reducing tension in the area, and of also preserving the principle (and possibly the practice) of the French presence.<sup>53</sup> They were followed by the Nouméa Accord (1998) which replaced a referendum on independence which was to have been held that year but was postponed for another 15–20 years as part of the new agreement. This accord formally acknowledged the trauma of colonisation for Kanaks, and all signatories recognised that 'Kanak identity' was central to a new, more autonomous territory with its own citizenship. It legislated the end of New Caledonia's previous status as a *territoire d'outre-mer* (overseas territory) of France, and while many felt that this implementation of an 'irreversible' process for the transfer of administrative power did not go far enough



Figure 7. Steel frame underlying the fading iroko timber photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/ Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

toward achieving full *indépendance kanak et socialiste* (Kanak socialist independence), it was generally understood as a reconciliatory gesture and precedent-setting compromise for decolonisation in a multi-ethnic state.<sup>54</sup>

Central to the accords was the recognition that political progress rested on the capacity to put Kanak culture, custom, identity and experience at the centre of life in New Caledonia. As a key signatory of the Matignon Accords (in his capacity as leader of Union Calédonienne), Tjibaou lobbied for these principles until he was assassinated in 1989 by a dissenting Kanak independentist, Djubelli Wea.<sup>55</sup> Despite the belief of extremists that the accords would compromise the potential for independent sovereignty,<sup>56</sup> the Matignon Accords established the conditions whereby indigenous culture and rights were not to

be acknowledged in a rhetorical or symbolic sense only, but were to become the basis for the political reconstruction of the new, multi-ethnic country. The close relationship that emerged between the constitution and development of the CCT and the Matignon Accords and then the Nouméa Accord (the CCT opened one day before the latter agreement was signed) was intended as a gesture of goodwill on behalf of the French Government toward Kanaks. The ADCK was established (as part of the Matignon Accords) to be the territory's principal cultural body, and was charged with promoting Kanak culture and heritage (as the key component of Tjibaou's vision for the future). The interweaving of culture and politics may, as such, have been officially recognised in the constitution of the ADCK, and the CCT may have been intended to open out a space for what James Tully calls a 'post-imperial dialogue — informed by the spirit of mutual recognition and accommodation of cultural diversity'.<sup>57</sup>

## Negotiating new forms of cultural identity for a multi-ethnic state

This approach toward representing Kanak culture continues to be legitimated within the CCT on the basis of Tjibaou's desire to create a space of possibility for the emergence of new and shifting forms of cultural identity and practice — a point which continues to be contextualised by another ongoing dialogue about the relationship between modernity and Kanak culture. And while Tjibaou's idea of a modern Kanak identity can be understood according to a postcolonial framework, whereby identity is historically and socially contingent and shifting,<sup>58</sup> Caroline Graille comments that in 1998, a curator at the CCT claimed that it would be



Figure 8. **Looking over third village, across the roofline** photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

'unthinkable' for the CCT to include work by non-Kanak artists in the centre. This has since occurred, however, and may reveal a broader and more recent attempt at constructing — through the agency of the centre as a key actor in this — a 'multicultural Caledonian identity'.<sup>59</sup> She argues further that:

the project to construct 'postcoloniality' in a multicultural context as neither a Kanak national state nor a French-dominated quasi-colony is still very recent in New Caledonia ... Local artists are only just beginning to produce 'national' aesthetic icons whose symbolism will necessarily break with a very Eurocentric, essentialist vision of Kanak culture as 'traditional'/'pre-contact' (and thus colonised and dead), but also be very different

from the colonialist vision of New Caledonia as a 'small France in the Pacific'.<sup>60</sup>

This intent is evident in the general style of work included in the contemporary Kanak and Oceanian collection (many of which were commissioned by the CCT) that is exhibited in the Bérétara Hall.<sup>61</sup> The Kanak works, such as Jean-Noël Mero's sculpture *Oubliées de l'histoire* (*Abandoned by the History*) (2001) and Yolande Moto's painting *Un nouveau regard sur notre passé* (*A New Look on our Past*) (1997), often combine aspects of traditionalism with imagery that is highly narrative in style and reminiscent of the cultural renaissance of the 1970s. While this reveals the struggle to come to terms with what it means to be Kanak in a contemporary world,<sup>62</sup> it also displays the attempt to represent diversity within the Kanak community, and to recognise the immigrant groups living in New Caledonia (the population today is over 215,000 people: 42.5 per cent are Kanak, and while Europeans form the majority, other ethnic groups include immigrants from Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and elsewhere).<sup>63</sup> Expanding the centre's focus on Kanak cultural heritage and identity has meant that it can focus on the intersections and cross-cultural dialogue that have historically occurred between communities and cultural forms in New Caledonia. This agenda is currently employed in a temporary exhibition on Louise Michel (*Paris — Nouméa: Les communards en Nouvelle-Calédonie*) (2005), exiled to New Caledonia for her involvement in the 1871 Paris Commune. Shown in the Komwi Hall, the exhibition uses events in Michel's life to illustrate colonial relationships and dialogues between French settlers, convicts and Kanaks. Including artefacts such as large shells engraved with images of 'European man' or 'Kanak man', the exhibition shows

how each culture represented itself and each other at this time.

As the country grapples with the conceptual issues pertaining to representation in a national context and how to represent diversity, the centre has become the subject of much debate amongst New Caledonians. While many support the work it does in promoting Kanak cultural identity and representing this to the world, others have criticised it as a biased symbol that is either too focused on Kanak culture or 'not Kanak enough'.<sup>64</sup> Commenting, for example, on the CCT's perceived lack of local visitors and support: 'of Kanaks, for whom the Centre was built, one hardly meets any. Of Caldoches [descendants of early French settlers<sup>65</sup>], even less', local journalist Anne Pitoiset noted that the CCT, 'established to enable and promote the cultural rebirth of the Kanaks ... has become not only an identifiable emblem of New Caledonia; but perhaps, to date, the only really internationally successful symbol'.<sup>66</sup> Pitoiset argues that the CCT's lack of support by Kanaks is connected to its repudiation of history, on the basis that it risks denying the facts and experiences of colonisation. Others, she explains, see it as preaching a version of colonially constructed culture back to them ('we do not need the Centre to know our culture').<sup>67</sup> A customary chief who heads the Kanak Socialist Liberation Party, Nidoish Naisseline, has argued that it is a Kanak centre for white people, saying, 'I have the impression that ethnologists from Paris have come here to teach us about our culture'.<sup>68</sup> Dissatisfaction with the CCT is not expressed only by Kanaks, and Pitoiset reports that some non-Kanaks resent the CCT as being designed 'only for Kanaks', while others wish it represented a more multi-ethnic population, so that, '[w]hen one goes into the Centre, one should have an idea of New Caledonia

as a whole ...<sup>69</sup> This controversy about the representational responsibilities of the CCT has also continually surrounded festivals and other cultural events staged there, from the 1998 exhibition of Pacific art that accompanied its opening, to the highly political eighth Festival of Pacific Arts in 1999, which 'generated protests from radical Kanak, who called it a "folk-lorisation" of their culture'. On the other hand, though, supporters of this festival 'saw it as the Kanak reclaiming their "place in the sun" as Tjibaou put it'.<sup>70</sup>

## The CCT, the overseas media and the 'global war of images'

The depth of difference that characterised local receptions to the CCT has not, however, tended to be replicated by international commentary on the centre and its programs.<sup>71</sup> This may be because the ADCK actively solicited international press interest during the years leading up to the centre's opening and throughout its opening festivals. While most of this focused on the much-promoted architecture emerging on the site, the reports, if making anything other than the most superficial of comments in relation to the building, frequently correlated the emergent building with a new-found peacefulness (the violent insurgencies that wracked the territory throughout the 1980s appeared suppressed to the visiting writers). Located predominantly in the 'Arts' or 'Travel' sections of major daily newspapers, the resulting columns generally expressed the belief that the CCT was designed to function as a new emblem of hope for, and belief in, cultural reconciliation. In one case, the writer says: 'Just as France has designed a model decolonisation for New Caledonia, it has bestowed a jewel of a monument on its historically troubled territory'.<sup>72</sup>

These expressions of relief reflect

more than just the writers' enjoyment of the new spectacle. While every country has to negotiate ongoing issues in relation to the form and content of dominant images of national identity, this process is especially fraught for New Caledonia, which continues negotiations over cultural, political and economic independence (or inter-dependence) while balancing the national, sub-national, international and individual impulses that are associated with an increasingly globalised and transnational context. And while architecture and urban design have always performed important roles in the clarification of spatial and social order, newspaper reportage of the early days of the CCT show how the media contributes to producing or promoting particular images, a point which also demonstrates the ideological processes that are present in the production of the CCT itself. As an important form of 'publicity' (as well as a useful, albeit partial, mode of gauging public reception), media sources provide a textual archive and are significant for what they reveal about the public sphere and public culture that emerged in New Caledonia in response to the CCT. In explaining the ongoing political urgency of images, whether they be manifested in print or built form, Murray Edelman says: 'Especially subtle, powerful, and common are buildings that reinforce a belief that people's ties to a historic past or a promising future are their important identities'.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, of the international responses to the centre that I surveyed, the dominant images produced by the CCT presented an idealised picture of Kanak tribal culture that is depicted as forward-focused, ongoing and part of a much greater universal continuum, but that was combined with a much more chimerical, albeit omnipresent, effect of a still-present colonial regime. This focus on the far reaching past and future means that the



inter-ethnic tensions of the interim period — or the complexity of local responses to the centre — are not highlighted.<sup>74</sup>

These characteristics present an image of the CCT that is consistent with Lawrence Vale's definition of a 'mediated monument'.<sup>75</sup> While taking into account the point that 'architecture and design have always performed important roles in the clarification of spatial and social order' so that the built environment can often be seen as providing a demonstration or means to interpret national identity, Vale contends that the central point of these structures is that they function as 'monuments that are inseparable from the media campaigns conducted to construct (and constrict) their interpretation'.<sup>76</sup> In these buildings, political power is often conveyed through the self-conscious construction of 'forward-reaching symbols'<sup>77</sup> that have become further animated by the publicity campaigns and international press interest associated with the CCT's opening. In this case, the media has been particularly influential in shaping public interpretation internationally, and in paying attention to the parade of symbols produced by the opening celebrations and the initial exhibitions of contemporary visual culture and Pacific arts commissioned from across the region. For instance, in one example, the journalist focused on the genius of the architect to open the article:

Designed by renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano, the monument is breathtaking. It is an ensemble of villages and tree-studded areas, of different functions and different itineraries, of full and empty spaces, says Mr Piano, who this year [1998] won the prestigious Pritzker prize for his work.<sup>78</sup>

Another journalist writes that:

New Caledonia's new cultural

centre rises from Nouméa's tropical landscape like a prehistoric temple. The building's striking architecture gives it an almost ethereal quality and the inventiveness of this design has invited comparison with Sydney's Opera House.<sup>79</sup>

Focusing thus on the synergies that appear to exist between the building and its environment in the first place, and on the relationship between the building and traditional 'prehistoric' culture in the second, arts columnists may contribute to the political neutralisation of the CCT. This reportage risks privileging a forward-looking focus that, when accompanied by a lack of critical analysis, makes only 'politically useful' links to the past.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, contributing to the validity of this argument, Vale contends that '[i]n the Pacific Rim of the 1990s and beyond, we are witnessing a global war of images'.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

Driving up from Nouméa to the Centre Culturel Tjibaou for the first time, noticing how the *grandes cases* look persistent and unforgiving about having forced their way through the natural vista, the centre's pose appeared to me to be confrontational. Despite the CCT's involvement in contemporary politics (and indeed, considering that it was the product of such politics) the real impact and urgency of these politics — cultural politics — struck me, and something James Clifford had said about Tjibaou vividly came to mind. He said that Tjibaou had insisted that the cultural centre be located in the hostile, settler city of Nouméa because, according to Clifford, 'the politics of cultural and political identity, as he saw it, always worked the boundaries'.<sup>82</sup>

I had initially taken note of this because I had never really understood why the centre



Figure 9. **Looking toward the centre from the Mwakaa (traditional ceremonial grounds)**

photograph by K Message, courtesy ADCK-Culturel Centre Tjibaou/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architectes

was located in such a hostile environment, when to my mind it would have been a more convincing gesture of reconciliation for the French Government to finance the existent Centre Culturel Goa Ma Bwarhat, designed by Tjibaou, in the (traditionally pro-independence) northern town of Hienghène.<sup>83</sup> But when I saw the CCT, looming large — and looking like a series of shields (or upcast fists) that have burst through the ground and now refuse to give way — Clifford's comment about Tjibaou's statement suddenly made sense. Later I asked Emmanuel Kasarhérou for his view on this, and he reiterated Tjibaou's point, explaining that it was important that the centre be in town, as a visible symbolic reminder of the continued existence of Kanak culture (for urban Kanaks, visitors from regional tribes, and non-Kanaks). Further reading revealed it was Jean-Marie Tjibaou's idea to 'implant' the ADCK and the CCT 'in the very city in which Kanaks had hitherto been second-class citizens if not entirely excluded'.<sup>84</sup> Kasarhérou also said that if the centre had

been located in a rural region, it would have further ostracised Kanaks by suggesting that they are linked to tradition and the past rather than the contemporary reality and changing cultural identities of Kanaks living in the city (which more and more are doing). This would have amounted to 'putting the Tjibaou Centre out of view, in your back yard',<sup>85</sup> rather than offering a contemporary and progressive symbol of national identity. Yet even more than this, the centre appears to stand over the city, holding it to account for the events of the past while also offering a progressive and spectacular symbol of identity. This image has stayed with me — of the CCT as an extremely complex case study that shows perhaps more than any others the inter-implication of culture and politics, and the high stakes that are attached to the production of new museums.

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## Notes

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