

**IMAGINING A JUST FUTURE FOR
NEW CALEDONIA:
GREEN MINING, CLIMATE JUSTICE, AND THE
KANAK FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE**

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Can a just transition be achieved within the context of decolonisation in the south Oceania Island of New Caledonia, a *suis generis* overseas collectivity of the French Republic? Like its Pacific neighbours, New Caledonia is already feeling the catastrophic impact of climate change. Yet, its post-colonial future, like its past, is deeply linked to struggles over mining sovereignty. New Caledonia is the fourth largest producer of nickel in the world (US Geological Survey 2022), a mineral used historically to make stainless steel for the construction industry. However, with the sudden increase in demand for nickel for lithium-ion batteries in electric cars, New Caledonia is now at the forefront of the global energy transition. One of the country's three nickel refineries, Prony Resources, signed in 2021 its first multi-year agreement with Tesla to supply the electric car maker directly with nickel. As such, the island has been thrown deep into the contradictory global goal of achieving a low-carbon economy whilst extracting even larger quantities of energy transition minerals, with the potential to 'enlarge and intensify social and ecological injustice' (Bainton *et al.* 2021: 1).

New Caledonia has been described by Le Meur and Levacher (2022: 88) as 'a classical instance of a globalised mining economy'. The contemporary political context of mining operations includes large multinational extraction companies alongside international environmental

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and indigenous NGOs and the use of new development discourses and regulations (Le Meur and Levacher 2022: 88). Crucially, the country's indigenous Kanak people have conducted their fight against metropolitan France for post-colonial sovereignty 'on the mining front' following the bloodshed years of the 1984-88 civil conflict for independence (Demmer 2018: 37) (pers. trad.). Since the 1990s, independence leaders have focussed on the social, environmental, and cultural injustices of nickel mining, promoting a Kanak discourse of resource nationalism in which participation in the ownership and control of mining is viewed as a central instrument for achieving economic autonomy and political emancipation (Le Meur and Levacher 2022: 88).

This article addresses first the historical entanglement of nickel extraction, colonisation and indigenous claims to sovereignty which characterise the resource curse in New Caledonia. Understanding to what extent extraction capitalism has shaped the political environment and legal architecture (Le Meur *et al.* 2013) of New Caledonia is a necessary precursor to examining a way forward for the island, out of the grasp of its resource curse.

Secondly, the article lays out the concept of a just transition as it may apply to New Caledonia, and the possibility of it beyond government and corporate greenwashing whilst avoiding the reproduction of capitalist extraction structures (Bainton *et al.* 2021). Considering the impact of climate change, the environmental impacts of mining, and the country's increasing social and economic inequalities, such a debate presents an important opportunity to open new agendas on climate justice, energy democracy and decarbonised degrowth in an island whose political horizon has long been framed by the nickel industry (Banaré 2017).

Indeed, nickel extraction may be part of New Caledonia's 'chosen path of emancipation, which is hardly questioned today' however this raises the issue of the place in the world for an island in the South Pacific also confronted with the imperative of sustainability (Sourisseau *et al.* 2016: 450) (pers.trad.). New Caledonia, or Kanaky, belongs to the tightly connected 'Sea of Islands' as described by Tongan poet and scholar Epeli Hau'Ofa (2008). A Sea of Islands where the world of Oceania is no longer constructed through a western imperial prism as a series of 'small, poor, and isolated' islands (Hau'Ofa 2008: 34) in a far sea – fated to become helpless victims of climate change (Jolly 2019). Rather, Pasifika activists imagine a decolonised Oceania where the agency of its people across many different cultures is recognised, an agency increasingly loud and visible on

the international stage, including through regional long-term planning such as the ‘2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent’ (Pacific Islands Forum).

A historical trajectory defined by a colonialism of everyday violence and nickel mining

New Caledonia is classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a biodiversity hotspot and is ranked third in the world for its level of endemism. The flora of its mining soils is particularly rich and original (IEOM 2020). It hosts the second largest barrier reef in the world, and its maritime zone extends over 23,000 km², more than half of which is listed in six sections as UNESCO World Heritage sites. In 2020, the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the WWF-France (WWF) and the Agence de la Transition Ecologique (ADEME) commissioned research seeking to explore a future for New Caledonia on the principle of ecological sustainability, arguing that ‘New Caledonia is not an isolated archipelago in the Pacific, it is a laboratory at the heart of planetary issues that can become an example on a world scale’ (Renault cited in Vertigo Lab and Bioeko Consultants 2020: iv).

However, like many other countries throughout Oceania, colonisation and resource extraction have gone hand in hand in New Caledonia and the island shares a history with its neighbours of damaging social, environmental, and cultural impacts (Banivanua Mar 2016). Banaba, Nauru, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, and West Papua (Teaiwa 2014; Allen 2018; Storr 2016) are all examples of countries in Oceania which were exploited for their resources by colonial powers with devastating consequences.

Hau’Ofa argued in 1993 ‘Nineteenth-century imperialism erected boundaries that led to the contraction of Oceania, transforming a once boundless world into the Pacific Island states and territories that we know today’ (Hau’Ofa 2008: 34). The colonial imposition of borders enabled environmental devastation, and as Storr found, ‘Systematic and direct practices of environmental pressure and resource exploitation have characterised imperial treatment of ocean islands for centuries’ (Storr 2016: 534).

When France annexed New Caledonia in 1853, it had been home for over three thousand years at least to the Melanesian people, descendants of the

Lapita culture, with more than thirty languages spoken. France turned New Caledonia into a convict colony between 1864 and 1898 – deporting political prisoners from the Commune de Paris insurrection and from other colonies within its Empire, such as Algeria.

Nickel was discovered in New Caledonia shortly after colonisation, and the island's nickel exports quickly grew to dominate the world's supply for several decades. As a key ingredient in the production of steel, nickel was essential in the lead up to the first world war (Black 2015: 1). Between 1870 and 1920 indentured workers arrived from other French colonies - Indochina, New Hebrides, and the Dutch East Indies, as well as Japan to work in mining and agriculture (Le Meur 2017: 37).

The colonial culture of the 'brutalisation of social relationships' (Merle 2017) normalised violence against the Kanak population, amidst land dispossession and the establishment by the colonial power of an administrative chiefdom (Le Meur 2017: 37) (pers.trad.). In 1887, France imposed the disciplinary Code de l'Indigenat, 'confining Kanaks to reserves, imposing a per head tax, circumscribing their freedom of movement and requiring them to perform free labour' (Fisher 2014: 3). Less than ten years earlier, in 1878, Chief Ataï had led a major uprising after denouncing the destruction of Kanak agricultural land by European cattle. The uprising was quelled by the French, just as was the one in 1917, which had been sparked by the recruitment of 'volunteer' Kanak to fight in Europe. Both rebellions had traumatic consequences as entire villages were destroyed or displaced, with repercussions lasting to this day.

From the 1940s onwards France progressively allowed New Caledonia more political autonomy and ended the Code de l'Indigenat in 1946. This increased autonomy was short-lived however as the nickel boom of the 1960s saw France increase its strategic interest in mining in New Caledonia – by 1974 France owned 50 percent of the Société Le Nickel (SLN), the largest mining company in New Caledonia at the time (Horowitz 2004: 292). Simultaneously, France tightened its control over New Caledonia's government as well as its authority over rural districts, investments, and mining regulations (Horowitz 2004: 292). France also began actively promoting immigration to New Caledonia from France and other French Pacific Islands (Horowitz 2004: 292), which led to 'heightened tensions among ethnic groups, and between Noumea and the rural areas as most migrants supported France's rule' (Horowitz 2004: 300). The arrival of construction workers from French Polynesia and

Wallis and Futuna on the back of the nickel boom for instance ‘modified on the long term the demographic balance and the population politics on the island’ (Nickel Syndex 2015: 7).

Until mid-2021, a large statue of Governor Olry dominated the townhall square in Nouméa, New Caledonia’s capital. It is under Governor Olry’s leadership that Chief Ataï was decapitated, and his head sent to France during the 1878 uprising. In 2022 a statue representing the 1988 handshake between Kanak visionary Jean-Marie Tjibaou and French conservative settler and mining magnate Jacques Lafleur is set to take the place of Governor Olry’s statue, and the plaza is to be renamed the ‘Peace Plaza’. The handshake marked the end of New Caledonia’s 1984 to 1988 civil conflict for independence, which had culminated with a hostage crisis on the outer island of Ouvéa and the death of 19 Kanak men and six members of the French military. Tjibaou and Lafleur shook hands over the signature of the Accords de Matignon treaties in June 1998– it was the start of an arduous journey towards a ‘common destiny’, a term which made its first appearance ten years later with the next treaty, the Accord de Nouméa. For anthropologist Pierre-Yves Le Meur, a ‘common destiny’ refers ‘to the difficult political, social and cultural articulations between socio-ethnic worlds’ which have been, throughout New Caledonia’s colonisation, ‘constructed in a radically segregated manner and continue to function in a very segmentary mode despite the multiple individual, family, friendly or professional ties crossing the ethnic borders’ (Le Meur 2017: 36) (pers.trad.).

In 2019, New Caledonia’s indigenous people represented 41 percent of its population of 270,000 (ISEE 2020). The remainder is made up of 24 percent European – descendants of convicts and more recent arrivals from France, 11 percent mix communities, 8 percent from the French Pacific collectivity of Wallis and Futuna and 7 percent are ‘other’ – descendants of indentured workers, and from French Polynesia (ISEE 2020).

New Caledonia is one of 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories which remain on the agenda of the C-24, the United Nation’s Special Committee on Decolonisation. The country was first added to the list in 1946, however France negotiated its removal in 1947. It was reinserted onto the list in 1986.

In 1983, France recognised the Kanak people’s right to auto-determination under international law, which then ‘took about forty years to be able to be expressed’ (David and Tirard 2022: 2) (pers. trad.). The Kanak leaders,

though not obliged to do so, agreed to include the country's non-Kanak communities in future votes on independence (David and Tirard 2022: 2). The participation of all ethnic communities has never since been disputed, however only individuals enrolled on a specific electoral list according to strict criteria are allowed to vote in the referendums which took place in 2018, 2020 and 2021. These referendums marked the conclusion of the twenty-year framework which set the path towards a negotiated decolonisation under the terms of the Accord de Nouméa, signed in 1998. The preamble of the Accord de Nouméa also acknowledged, for the first time, the impact of colonisation on the dignity of the Kanak people, 'deprived of their identity' (Le Meur 2017) (pers. trad.).

Each of the three referendums asked voters the same question: 'Do you want New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty and become independent?'. The first two referendums, in 2018 and 2020, took place in peaceful conditions, with the Kanak independence movement gaining votes between each as the loyalists' 'No' won with 56.7 percent then 53.3 percent of the vote. The Kanak population was however largely absent from the third vote in 2021 after pro-independence leaders instructed against voting (David and Tirard 2022). Just over 45 percent of the electoral body took part in the referendum, 96 percent of whom voted against independence, highlighting a much-deteriorated political climate (David and Tirard 2022).

In July 2021, France's Overseas Ministry had released a document explaining the consequences of a Yes or No to independence vote. Under the hypothesis of a 'Yes' outcome, the document stated financial assistance from France to New Caledonia would decrease on a large scale and very rapidly, creating what Kanak leaders described as a climate of fear unfavourable to the country's access to sovereignty (David and Tirard 2022: 6). Later in the year, New Caledonia suddenly experienced an 'exponential surge' (David and Tirard 2022: 7) (pers. trad.) in covid cases, which deeply affected the Kanak and Pacific Islander communities. Customary Kanak leaders declared a year of mourning. Despite a request from New Caledonia's pro-independence leaders, the French government refused to delay the referendum, leading some to believe it was no longer upholding its role of neutral facilitator in the decolonisation process (David and Tirard 2022).

The country now faces an uncertain future – the next deadline for the end of negotiations is June 2023. Meanwhile, the first pro-independence

government in forty years is attempting to implement new financial and economic reforms. Despite its GDP ranking close to that of France, New Caledonia is experiencing increasing social and economic inequalities that are much worse than in France (David and Tirard 2022; IEOM 2020). In such a pivotal context, opening a debate on reversing the resource curse and extending it to address concepts of degrowth and energy democracy in New Caledonia may offer an alternative steppingstone towards reaching a common destiny in a decolonised future.

Understanding the resource curse and mineral sovereignty in New Caledonia

New Caledonia suffers from the classical syndromes of ‘the resource curse’ and ‘Dutch Disease’ attributed to mining enclaves, to which local experts also add the ‘French Disease’ – ‘a specific Caledonian effect’, thanks to its stifling dependency on financial transfers from France – through aid money for development, through the indexed payment of civil servants on French salaries, and through tax benefit schemes (Ris *et al.* 2017: 4). Mining companies do not pay tax for their first fifteen years of operation, and benefit from considerable tax benefits. In seminal research published in 1995, Jean Freyss further argued these financial transfers from France have served to create an enduring ‘assisted economy’, whereby ‘even as local officials have been granted more political responsibilities, ever-increasing financial assistance has served to augment New Caledonia’s economic dependence on the metropole’ (Horowitz 2004: 294).

Nickel mining and production represent about 90 percent of New Caledonia’s exports. It’s share in the country’s GDP varies depending on the global market conditions, from a low of 3 percent in 1998 to a peak of 18 percent in 2007 (Sourisseau *et al.* 2017: 64) and currently averaging about 7 percent (IEOM 2020).

In comparison, services – including administration, account for 61 percent of GDP, and agriculture 2 percent (IEOM 2020). Nickel mining’s share of GDP offers however a poor reflection of the actual contribution of the nickel industry to New Caledonia’s economy, which accounts for 14 percent of private direct and indirect employment (Ris *et al.* 2017; ISEE 2022). The culmination of the direct, indirect, and induced impacts of the nickel industry in New Caledonia represents 20 percent of the market

wealth produced in-country (ISEE 2022). However, for Lagadec and Sudrie, since there is no taxation on extraction, this, ‘in practice, makes ore a free resource for the companies that exploit it’ (Lagadec and Sudrie 2013: 2) (per.trad.). In addition, for Ris *et al.* (2017: 4), New Caledonia’s ‘extractive sector is developing rather autonomously from the rest of the economy, without pulling up productivity’ (pers. trad.).

Furthermore, the mining and metal processing industry consumes 80 percent of the island’s electricity production (IEOM 2020), with the concomitant CO₂ production resulting in New Caledonia ranking, on a per capital basis, as third in the world in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, and first in the world in terms of greenhouse gas emissions relative to the combustion of coal. It should be noted that 52 percent of these emissions come directly or indirectly from the nickel industry – including 32 percent related to energy production for this sector and 20 percent related to the activity itself (Vertigo Lab and Bioeko Consultants 2020: 15).

Today, New Caledonia hosts about 20 small local mining companies – which focus on ore extraction only, and three multinational mining companies which also operate a refinery each. The Société Le Nickel (SLN), Koniambo Nickel SAS (KNS) and Prony Resources plants were all established in different local political conditions and are linked to specific political groups, around questions of independence and anti-independence (Kowasch 2012). In 2009 New Caledonia’s umbrella pro-independence party, the Front de libération kanak national et socialiste (FLNKS), developed a ‘Nickel Doctrine’ based on three principles: control of resources, local treatment of nickel only – except for Caledonian offshore plants, and the desire to become a majority shareholder in the Société Le Nickel (SLN), the country’s oldest mining company, which operates from the southern province of New Caledonia (Roger 2021).

There exists a large body of work in relation to the concept of resource curse (Ballard and Banks 2003, Banks 2008, Filer and Macintyre 2006, Watts 2004) however Goodman and Worth (2008) offer an overarching definition of the resource curse as ‘the socio-economic disadvantage, political disruption or environmental degradation that results from dependence on extractive industries’, a situation ‘where dependence on resource exports locks these countries into low-growth underdevelopment’ (Goodman and Worth 2008: 202).

Le Meur *et al.* (2013: 194) emphasise the need to gain a better understanding of the specific local power relations at play around

extraction when examining the characteristics of a country's resource curse by historicizing 'mining development and outcomes as resulting from the interplay between actors and institutions involved in the mining arenas at different levels'. In New Caledonia, 'sovereign pluralism' first resulted from the context of 'shared sovereignty' between the New Caledonian and French governments opened by the political agreements of Matignon and Nouméa (Le Meur and Levacher 2022).

The Matignon Accords split New Caledonia into three provinces, each with its own local government, in an attempt to 're-balance' the political and economic power between the island's north – mostly rural and at the time home to a larger Kanak population, and the south, more developed and host to the affluent Nouméa. Only one refinery existed in New Caledonia at the time, the Société Le Nickel (SLN), sitting at the entrance of Nouméa in the Southern Province. Owned by French company Eramet, the SLN was established in 1880 by the Rotschild family. Eramet currently owns 56 percent of the SLN, whilst New Caledonia's three local provincial governments own 36 percent together (as well as 4 percent of Eramet) and the Japanese company Nisshin Steel owns 10 percent. Despite financial difficulties due to the vagaries of the international nickel market, social and technical difficulties, the SLN has survived with considerable financial support from France. The company is currently the world's first producer of ferronickel, aimed at the stainless-steel market. In March 2022 the SLN entered a new agreement with Australian-based Queensland Pacific Metals (QPM) to supply it with nickel ore. QPM is developing its Townsville Energy Chemicals Hub (TECH) Project—a battery metals refinery for the lithium-ion battery and electric vehicle sector. The government of New Caledonia approved an increase of the SLN's annual nickel ore export quota to allow it to do so.

New Caledonia's second refinery, on the other hand, sits in the far north of New Caledonia. In 1990, two years after the Accords de Matignon were signed, the Northern Province, led by the pro-independence party PALIKA – Party de Libération Kanak, bought the Société Minière du Sud Pacific (SMSP), a mining company belonging to the French loyalist political leader Jacques Lafleur. By the mid-nineties, the SMSP had become one of the largest nickel producers in the world. Ten years later, in 1998, New Caledonia should have held a referendum on independence, as the Accords de Matignon stipulated. Instead, Kanak leaders agreed to a compromise, the Accord de Nouméa, which set the path for 'negotiated decolonisation' over the next twenty years with a gradual, irreversible, transfer of

executive powers to New Caledonia, except for justice, public order, defence, finance and currency (Maclellan 1999: 246).

In the lead up to signing the Accord de Nouméa, the country's Kanak leaders had negotiated the 'Accord de Bercy', or 'mining preamble'. The Accord de Bercy set out the terms for the transfer to the Northern Province of one of the world's richest mining deposits - the Massif du Koniambo, in the north of New Caledonia, previously owned by the Société Le Nickel (SLN). Koniambo Nickel SAS refinery (KNS) was therefore the result of many years of planning by the pro-independence leadership and, whilst not without controversy and social conflict (Horowitz 2003; Kowasch 2012), it benefited from a large support base. Now a 51/49 joint-venture with multinational Glencore, KNS began production in 2013. It has however been plagued with technical and social problems which have slowed production. The Northern Province was in 2021 criticised by New Caledonia's Territorial Chamber of Accounts for not having yet provided dividends to the province's population, as was its strategic goal. The Chamber concluded the 'only benefits for the Northern Province was 'employment and irrigation of the economic fabric'' (MD 2021) (pers. trad.). However, according to Batterbury *et al.* (2020: 112), 'Nowhere else in the world does an indigenous group [...] control the majority shares in a mining enterprise on the scale of Koniambo'.

Hence, 'beyond this formal layering' of claims to sovereignty, exemplified by the Matignon and Nouméa Accords, Le Meur and Levacher argue 'alternative forms of sovereignty claims structure the mining/decolonising New Caledonian context'. They are usually 'bottom up' claims to sovereignty around mining, and include indigenous, corporate, nationalist, and environmental sovereignties (2022: 88). This was particularly the case from the begin of the years 2000s onwards when the two new nickel refineries were being built, KNS and Prony Resources, albeit in opposite political conditions. Le Meur and Levacher found a 'wide range of actors made increasing claims of sovereignty, explicit and implicit, over governments (the 3 provinces, the New Caledonian government, the French state), indigenous associations, customary authorities, supra-national organisations, the global mining sector, big international NGOs running protected areas, etc. These processes can be seen as an expression of 'sovereignty from below'' (Le Meur and Levacher 2022: 74).

In New Caledonia's deep south for instance, Prony Resources was initially owned by Canadian mining company INCO, which begun building one of

the world's largest hydrometallurgical refineries, along with a seaport and tailing dams at the start of the 2000s without all the required permits, and 'behind the back' (quoted in Horowitz 2004: 303) of the local Kanak population. Classified SEVOSO II, the highest level of industrial risk by European standards, the refinery is different to New Caledonia's two other refineries as it uses high-pressure acid leaching, a technology then untested on such a scale.

The southern refinery was built at a time when the country was focused on 're-balancing' economic and political power between the north and the south by building the KNS refinery in the Northern Province, not adding another to the Southern Province. Brazilian mining giant Vale took over the southern refinery in 2006, sparking violent protests. Finally, in 2008, Vale signed with leaders of the local Kanak clans and Indigenous Environmental NGO Rhéébù Nùù a thirty-year 'Sustainable Development Pact' (Horowitz 2015; Levacher 2017). The refinery however experienced a series of acid spills after it began operations in 2010, amid controversy over other environmental pollution issues (MacLellan 2020).

Walker and Johnson (2018: 57) have proposed the term 'mineral sovereignty' as a method and concept to attempt to understand the power or geological agency of a mining operation in its 'historically organised, legible, and institutional forms' of the private corporation and the state: the 'subterranean' power of mining operations tends to shape all levels of a country's public governance (2018: 61).

Walker and Johnson argue 'conflicts over the exploitation of mineral resources and distribution of mineral wealth' are central to geopolitical history (2018: 61). Indeed, Sourisseau *et al.* (2017: 65) show how, in the 2000s, 'controlling the income from mining and metal processing was at the heart of the debate surrounding the country's future legal and political status. At stake was the nature of its future development: exogenous or endogenous; part of France or more or less autonomous'. The development of new nickel smelters had in fact 'long since come to symbolise this choice'.

In March 2021, leaders from both sides signed a historical political agreement allowing the sale of Vale New Caledonia to Prony Resources, a new consortium with a 51 percent majority local ownership – 30 percent owned by the SPMSC, a company made up of the island's three Provinces, and 21 percent owned by employees and local populations, in partnership with Swiss-based commodities trading house Trafigura, which owns 19

percent, and the Company Financière de Prony, which owns 30 percent. Vale's headquarter in Brazil had been suffering from the financial fall out of the recent collapse of two of its tailing dams - similar to those used by Vale in the south of New Caledonia, which had killed over two hundred people. The sale of the 'Usine du Sud' or Southern Refinery came after months of political turmoil over the future ownership of the mine, at times violent, reminiscent of the conflict which tore the island apart in the mid-1980s. Negotiations around the sale took place in the lead up to the country's second referendum on independence in October 2020, and when Sofinor, the development arm of New Caledonia's pro-independence Northern Province initially mounted a bid to purchase the mine from Vale, Sonia Backes, the French loyalist leader of the Southern Province responded with the claim that 'Those who propose this have a desire to economically colonise the Southern Province' (Maclellan 2020).

As Walker and Johnson put it, 'the authority to grant rights to mine and assert property in extracted minerals, to regulate mining profits and labour, to claim royalties and revenues, and to oblige companies to be responsible for environmental damage goes to the heart of questions of state, national and popular sovereignty' (2018: 61). New Caledonia's geopolitical history presents a complex illustration of this concept, from the importation of indentured labourers who worked in its nickel mines from the end of the 19th century to the development of indigenous resource nationalism as a path towards political independence from the 1990s onwards, and to France's migration push following the nickel boom of the 1960s.

The political contest for geological agency can also be found in the systemic narrative of nickel in New Caledonia, 'where economic growth and a sense of community are intrinsically linked' (Banaré 2017: 8) (pers.trad.). For Professor of Public Law in New Caledonia, Mathias Chauchat, and Dr Dominique Nacci, senior advisor on foreign trade, this narrative can lead to a 'mental block' (2016: 3) and is obvious in the way New Caledonia responds to financial losses on the nickel market: 'When nickel made money, New Caledonia built castles in the air. When the prices are low, people only see losses.' (Chauchat and Nacci 2016: 2).

Initially 'a great colonial narrative', the systemic narrative binding nickel extraction to New Caledonia's prospects and status within the French empire - and later, to emerging New Caledonian nationalisms and identities- was developed from the 1860s with chronicles, prospecting reports, and travelogues (Banaré 2017: 8). 'From the 1970s, with the

emergence of Kanak demands for political emancipation, this systemic narrative was ‘retranslated’ by anti-colonial separatists as a condition for the birth of a fair and independent nation: Kanaky’ (Banaré 2017: 8). For academic Eddy Banaré (2017), this highlights a complex and contradictory political narrative, where the involvement of Kanak people in nickel extraction is ‘both triumphant and traumatic’. Examining the meaning of the work ‘Le Dernier Crépuscule’ (2001), by Kanak playwright Pierre Gope, Banaré realises the sacred link to earth enters into contradiction with mining extraction, lived both as a colonial act and as an economic imperative of the Kanak independence project (2017: 2).

How then, do the Kanak people attempt to resolve this contradiction? A contradiction which pits a deep cosmologic connection to earth and the sea against mining, which damages forests, waterways and fisheries and creates social conflicts. How can a space be made, within the imperative to persuade, engage and negotiate with the non-indigenous community in New Caledonia under the terms of modern constitutionalism and international capitalism, to envision a just, plurinational, decolonised future?

As Ballard and Banks (2003) argue, the relationships that coalesce around mining projects are exceptional in their complexity, pitting European discourses of law, state, nation and economy originating in imperial histories against the efforts of indigenous peoples to both reground, restore and re-imagine their traditions, culture and identity. As Banks puts it, ‘the very different conceptualisation of natural resources in most Melanesian societies—as elements of the social as much as any external environmental sphere—means that resources become a conduit for local social and political agendas and tensions to be expressed’ (Banks 2008: 23). In New Caledonia’s case it has however meant that in recent decades the indigenous Kanak minority were ‘able to turn natural resource wealth some way to their own advantage’ (Batterbury *et al.* 2020: 596). Batterbury *et al.* (2020) found ‘the Kanak leadership have turned mineral resources to their economic and geopolitical advantage to benefit their own historically oppressed and marginalized population’.

In order to understand how this unique Kanak claim to mineral sovereignty was advanced and developed, we need to consider in more detail the complex relationships between the political economy of nickel mining and its formative role in political identities and relationships within New Caledonia as a ‘pluri-national’ community.

At the heart of it was the key idea of Kanak nationalism - the idea of achieving the full recognition of the Kanak people by entering the game of capitalism and (re)taking control of an economy dominated by settlers and largely dependent on transfers from France (Demmer 2017, 2018). Kanak leaders were aware of the ‘pitfalls of relying heavily on aid from metropolitan France’ (Horowitz 2004: 294). Hence, Paul Neaoutyne, the pro-independence leader of New Caledonia’s Northern Province, wrote in 2006 (Kowasch 2010: 176) (pers. trad.) ‘If we must enter in the activity of nickel, our philosophy is the mineral must be processed here. If we succeed, we will prove, one, that we are capable to manage a domain of activity that is essential to the country, two, that the re-balancing will not be achieved with ad hoc development contracts, and aid from France, without being able to create enough added value here to cover the cost of development’.

Is a just transition possible with so much at stake?

In 2016, before the green nickel boom landed on the sandy shores of New Caledonia, Chauchat and Nacci wrote about the dominance of the ‘theoretical questions’ around nickel mining and ownership, in particular the ‘orthodoxy of 51 percent equity share’. In mentioning this, they were referencing the Northern Province’s successful strategy in terms of developing a 51/49 shared partnerships with Glencore, and a 51/49 partnership with South Korean metallurgical company POSCO with their joint ‘offshore’ refining plant in South Korea. As mentioned, the Southern Refinery now also operates under a 51/49 ownership structure. Chauchat and Nacci argue however the problems remain: ‘Nothing is solved, and many people would take to the streets. Maybe it’s time of proclaiming a moratorium, so the New Caledonian population could finally digest and appropriate as much as possible a relative control of existing industrial projects and begin to improve competitiveness. This is far less noble, but certainly more effective.’ (Chauchat and Nacci 2016: 3). Chauchat and Nacci feared that ‘From North to South of New Caledonia, multinational companies fund the construction of all the plants and therefore fully operate the nickel industry’ (2016: 2), leaving in their wake debt and environmental and social damage.

In recent years, New Caledonia’s territorial and provincial governments have gone to some length to promote and implement policies towards

energy transition in New Caledonia. Its new Schéma pour la transition énergétique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie/ Energy Transition Scheme (STENC) was presented as New Caledonia's contribution to the international agreements concluded at the 21st United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP21) held in Paris in December 2015. This approach enabled New Caledonia to commit – through France – to the Paris Climate Agreement.

Under the STENC, New Caledonia has committed to reduce by the year 2030 its primary energy consumption by 20 percent, including in the mining and metal industry, and to provide electricity for public distribution that is from 100 percent renewable sources by 2030, as well as enable electricity self-sufficiency in its outer islands.

The STNC also aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to achieve by 2030 a reduction of 35 percent of CO₂ emissions in the residential and tertiary sectors – the equivalent of about 70,000 tons of carbon avoided over one year, and a reduction of 10 percent emissions in the mining and metallurgy sector - 140,000 tonnes of carbon equivalent avoided over one year.

Currently, New Caledonia's energy mix is made up of 97.4 percent fossil fuels, including 54.1 percent petroleum products and 44.9 percent coal, and 2.6 percent renewable energies (IEOM 2020). This strong energy dependence is directly linked to the presence of the mining and metallurgy industry which in 2019 accounted for nearly 55 percent of the total final energy consumption (IEOM 2020).

The new Prony Resources signed at the end of 2021 the country's first deal with Tesla to directly supply it with 44,000 tonnes of nickel a year to manufacture lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles. The deal was followed two months later by a 25-year purchase agreement with Total Energies Renewables France to develop a mega series of ground-based photovoltaic (PV) and battery energy storage projects as part of Prony Resources' plan to reach carbon neutrality by 2040 (Total Energies 2021).

New Caledonia is therefore now faced with a new set of challenges, which need to be approached carefully to avoid the island becoming 'a sacrifice zone in the green energy economy' (Scott and Smith 2017: 867), where communities continue to be affected by extraction capitalism (Bainton *et al.* 2021). Within such a context, a just transition means including the perspectives of climate justice, energy justice and environmental justice (Heffron and McCauley 2018: 74). It means for instance moving beyond

the greenwashing exercise of promoting ‘green jobs’ where ‘The creation of surplus labour and the continued use of cheap labour is likely to reinforce a ‘job-centric’ just transition, where part of the solution to this issue is found in the creation of ‘greener jobs’, rather than imaging ways to decouple income from labour and open up a discussion about the range of forces that shape community well-being’ (Bainton *et al.* 2021: 8).

Developing a renewable energy industry may not be enough to disentangle New Caledonia’s geopolitics from the decision-making structures of capitalism fossil extraction. When it comes to a just transition, the risk is those in possession of geological power become those also in possession of decision making and ownership of renewable energy. Bainton *et al.* (2021: 20) argue ‘Understanding how the idea is used, and by who, matters a great deal as we interrogate who bears the burden and shares the benefits of a global energy transition.’

Applying a research method such as mineral sovereignty to help historicise and decipher power relationships is useful in such a context, just as Heffron and McCauley (2018: 75) state: ‘There is a need to debate, discuss, research and apply the just transition. Governments worldwide are utilising the term (or words to the effect of) ‘transitioning to a low-carbon economy’. This latter term is promoted by the status quo, *i.e.* those in the dominant position in society. This is because the ‘low-carbon economy transition’ has and will allow for a very slow transition and also one that favors this status quo and consequently will result in a continuation of the ongoing inequality in society.’

Bainton *et al.* (2021: 8) argue it is impossible to achieve both a low carbon transition and a just transition at the same time, ‘without radically reimagining how resource extraction is conducted or without confronting the internal contradictions of extractive capitalism’. Likewise, when it comes to energy democracy and justice, Droubi *et al.* (2022: 6) argue ‘the ideal world is one that sharply contrasts with the capitalist neoliberal model, and the process is one of resistance against the same economic models’.

In their analysis of the potential for developing a diverse economy which is highly sustainable, the ADF and WWF joint research found several obstacles were in the way in New Caledonia when it came to satisfying basic social and economic needs. They observed ‘the main challenges for achieving a real ecological and social transition in the sense of strong sustainability are essentially linked to a reduction in inequalities, the

complex origins of which can only be resolved by the development of diversification’ (2020: 24).

During my research, I observed a generational shift, whereby emerging Kanak leaders, be they subcontractors to the mining industry, or environmental activists, social scientists, or artists, were more concerned with climate change and building a new relationship with New Caledonia’s Pacifika neighbours – renewing with and creating a new national Pacifika ‘way of being’, rather than resource nationalism.

It is a generation which grew up in the shadow of the 1980s civil conflict, who understand and respect the fight for independence led by their elders, many of whom paid with their life. Thirty years on however, this younger generation – the generation of the ‘common destiny’, faces a different set of complex challenges; consequently, some now oppose mining, some approach it as a ‘fait accompli’ which now provides for a challenging professional experience and a short-term financial stepping stone towards saving to develop other, perhaps more environmentally sustainable professional activities; others wish mining would take place on a smaller scale and allow for a greater diversification of the economy, away from a dependence on extraction, and away from a dependence on France and capitalism structures.

Conclusion

Geological agency (Walker and Johnson 2018) has been at the heart of New Caledonia’s political economy since nickel was discovered shortly after France annexed the island. Resource nationalism was central to negotiations over sovereignty and decolonisation during the 1990s and continues to be so as attests the fact that the sale of the Vale New Caledonia refinery in the Southern Province became a central focus of discussions and protests in the lead up to the October 2020 referendum on independence. Geological agency has shaped New Caledonia’s politics and economy for the past 150 years; the country has however reached a turning point with the conclusion of the Nouméa Accord, New Caledonia’s new role at the global forefront of the green energy transition and worsening social and economic inequalities.

The generation, encompassing multiple communities, who were children during the 1980s conflict for independence have now reached their forties, with new ideas, preoccupations and aspirations for Kanaky/New

Caledonia – in terms of sovereignty, eliminating social cleavages, climate change and type of development. In 1988, the Accords de Matignons divided New Caledonia into a federation of three provincial governments to ‘re-balance’ political and economic power, in 1998 the Accord de Nouméa established a twenty-year framework towards a ‘negotiated decolonisation’ and the irreversible transfer of most executive powers, today a framework which includes a national just transition approach, and addresses degrowth, energy democracy and climate justice, is needed. Decolonisation requires reversing the resource curse – detangling the country from extraction capitalism and imagining a post-colonial future turned as much towards the Sea of Islands that is Oceania as it is already towards France.

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