
ANNALIS
UNIVERSITATIS MARIAE CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA
LUBLIN – POLONIA

VOL. XX, 1

SECTIO K

2013

Pedagogical University of Cracow – Poland

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*La Nouvelle-Calédonie – the overseas face of France.
Impact of the colonial era on the contemporary
socio-economic situation of the archipelago*

ABSTRACT

Colonized by the French in the mid-nineteenth century, New Caledonia, due to its special legal status and geographical location, is unique among overseas territories of France. Being a penal colony, like French Guiana, it was the scene of a specific and therefore not very successful social experiment. Despite the acculturation processes of the indigenous community – the Kanaks, it is still the largest ethnic group in terms of culture in the archipelago. This paper presents an outline of New Caledonia's turbulent history and the consequences of colonial processes for the current socio-economic structure, which seem to be particularly important in the light of referendum on its independence planned for the years 2014–2019. The study was divided into several smaller parts regarding, respectively, selected historical events, social situation and economic problems, and showing the current domestic situation of the territory and the specificity of its relations with metropolitan France.

Key words: New Caledonia, French colonialism, the outline of socio-economic history, Kanak

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

New Caledonia – French overseas territory with special status (*sui generis*), located nearly seventeen thousand kilometres away from its mainland capital, together with French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna Islands, forms a small part of *France d'outre-mer* (Overseas France) in the western Pacific. If you take into account the GDP *per capita*, it belonged to the economically most prosperous regions of Overseas France in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of the colonial era on the contemporary socio-

economic situation of New Caledonia. The considerations of this study cover the period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The authors raise the question of stability and topicality of political ties with the metropolis that used to be sacred in the colonial era. Therefore, issues of autonomy rights and ethno-linguistic diversity of the archipelago were outlined. Other research questions relate to the impact of the colonisation processes on indigenous Kanak population and its place in the current social structure (both in terms of culture and demographics) of the territory. Given the vast time span of the events in question and their multitude, the study was developed as a review. Thus, it is dominated by a comparative analysis of scientific literature, mainly Polish and French, which concerns the discussed issues. This study should be seen as a modest attempt to systematise the existing work on bilateral relations between France and New Caledonia. As a consequence, some of the issues were discussed in detail while other are only outlined. The applied method enabled us to obtain a fairly comprehensive analysis of the issue.

IN THE COLONIAL GRIP OF FRANCE

The first colonizers of today's *Nouvelle-Calédonie* were the British. An English navigator James Cook, on September 5, 1774, during his second voyage to the Pacific, landed on the north-east coast of the island, near the village of *Balabio* (*Balade*). Because the landscape of the newly discovered territory was similar to the one of Scotland (in Latin: *Caledonia*), the island was named New Caledonia [Thomas 2007: 335–336]. One of participants of Cook's expedition, a naturalist Georg Forster described the coast of the island as a marshy plain with mangrove woods. Higher ground was covered with parched, scorched soil, and overshadowed by a range of naked mountains built of red mica and quartz [Forster 2007: 233]. Having climbed the mountain *Grande Terre*, within a few days Cook made the discovery of a nearby isle of *Pines*. With his expedition he also proved that *Terra Australis Incognita* – the mythical continent north of Antarctica – does not exist [Leszczycki, Fleszar 1971: 11]. The members of the expedition almost immediately recognized the natural wealth of New Caledonia. Especially noteworthy are studies conducted by an expert on natural history – Johann Reinhold Forster, who, along with his son, catalogued a significant number of specimens of the local flora.¹ Dogs and pigs, brought by the British and previously unknown to the ecosystem of the island, decimated the native fauna [O'Neill 2000: 59]. Despite continuous exploitation, almost fifty per cent of the original vegetation has been preserved to the present day. Without a doubt, this

¹ A detailed description of natural and ethnological studies is included in the book *Observations Made during a Voyage Round the World on Physical Geography, Natural History and Ethic Philosophy*, first published in 1778 in London.

is the result of low population density as well as the special, very pro-nature beliefs of the local community.

There is high probability that the first Frenchmen came to New Caledonia in 1788. However, this was never fully confirmed. The expedition to reconnoitre the northern part of the Pacific Ocean, organised at the initiative of Louis XVI, was led by two captains, Jean-Francois de la Perouse and Paul Fleuriot de Langle. Modernly equipped vessels *L'Astrolabe* and *La Boussole* probably sank near the Solomon Islands [Blond 1966: 105]. However, there is no doubt that in 1793 the French admiral Antoine Bruny d'Entrecasteaux made the discovery of *Iles Loyauté* – Loyalty Islands located 100 km north-east from the largest island in the archipelago [Davis 1925: 246], while another of his fellow countrymen, the explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville who was conducting research in Oceania in the years 1824–1829, was the first man to make a cartographic analysis of New Caledonia [Lefebvre, Pouthas, Baumont 1969: 280]. According to Jan Baszkiewicz [2008: 441], the motivation behind those Pacific expeditions was not so much scientific research, but primarily trade possibilities. The numerous expeditions of that time are the reason why even today native people of the archipelago present events of colonial history as the history of a French tribe that has left its European homeland [Thébault-Pietrzak 2011: 34].

The presence of Catholic missionaries coming from France since 1841 resulted in conflicts with Protestant pastors who were no less zealous to pursue their mission of evangelization among the indigenous population. Protestants from the London Missionary Society assumed that religious education in local languages will be more effective and will acquire more new followers [Labourdette, Auzias 2007: 48]. As time has shown, the applied strategy has proved to be effective. At the end of 1843, French missionaries sent by the *Société de la Propagation de la Foi* came into conflict with the local population. An intervention of colonial military forces was required to stabilize the situation [Logan, Cole 2011: 15]. In 1848, a Catholic mission was established on the Isle of Pines. However, Catholic preachers using French in their teachings were difficult to understand.

Initiated by the Europeans, the process of developing coastal settlements and the creation of new shipping lines enabled trade with the various peoples of the region. The most precious wealth of the newly acquired colony, the *bois de sandal* – sandalwood, was exported from the archipelago via ports located in *Balade*, *Kanalah*, *Kuana*, *Nakety*, *Pouébo* and *Yenguène* [Brainne 1854: 3]. In 1845, an English trader, James Paddon, who owned the island *Nou* decided to sell his lands to the French State. However, the actual beginning of the French presence in New Caledonia is considered to be the date of September 24, 1853, when the admiral Febvrier-Despointes in *Balade* announced the transformation of the archipelago into a French colony. The following year, in the south-western part of the island, the town of *Fort-de-France*²

² In 1866, the name of the town was changed to *Nouméa*. *Fort-de-France* was the capital of another French colony – Martinique.

was created, serving as headquarters and military base for garrison forces. Many researchers consider the location of this town to be the real beginning of a new phase in the political history of New Caledonia [Rallu 1985: 725].

By 1856, the community of the colony consisted mostly of soldiers and missionaries. Despite efforts made by the administrative authorities (according to the law of 1855, newcomers from Europe were automatically granted land), to 1859, they managed to bring only a small group of settlers to the colony. At the same time, the number of indigenous people was estimated to be 50–90 thousand people. When looking for factors limiting immigration, the first one to be considered is the significant geographical distance from mainland France: almost 17 thousand kilometres. The second factor was the difficult living conditions on the islands. In order to change this unfavourable situation, at the initiative of Napoleon III, New Caledonia became the location of a penal colony in 1864. It soon became home to political opponents and large numbers of Communards deported under the rule of the Paris Commune [Rekaweck 2010: 22]. The first 250 convicts were used to work in wetlands reclamation and in the construction of roads and prison buildings. It is assumed that in the period 1860–1897, about 22 thousand criminals and political prisoners were exiled to the archipelago [Aldrich, Connell 1992: 46]. Also the Isle of Pines, located 120 km from *Nouméa*, was adapted for prison and it served this function until the end of the nineteenth century, then falling into oblivion for decades [Jędrusik 2005: 116].

In the years 1860–1885, New Caledonia was governed by a *gouverneur* – governor who had a number of far-reaching powers. As a representative of the French government, the governor was given the right to allocate land, expropriate, and to appoint and dismiss other administration officials. In 1894, the governor P. T. Feillet decided to close the penal colony located on the island. The process of recruiting foreign workers began, in order to acquire contract workers for coffee harvest and nickel mining. During his time in office, almost 500 families came from mainland France and many workers came from the Indian subcontinent, Vietnam and Java, which may explain the current ethnic diversity of the inhabitants of New Caledonia. At the end of the nineteenth century, there were about 20,000 Europeans on the island, half of which were released prisoners.

The controversial provisions of *Le Code de l'indigénat*, originally in force in French Algeria, were adopted in New Caledonia in 1887. According to them, the population was divided into *citoyens français* (French citizens) and *sujets français* (French subjects), with a number of repressive measures against the latter, such as new taxes or the right to confiscate their possessions [Suret-Canele 1971: 333, Aldrich, Connell 1992: 342]. It should be noted that this was the applicable law until 1946, despite the provisions of the Geneva Agreement, signed by France in 1938, which prohibit all forms of forced labour. The period of the Second World War, when the territory of New Caledonia was occupied by Americans and there were 100 thousand soldiers

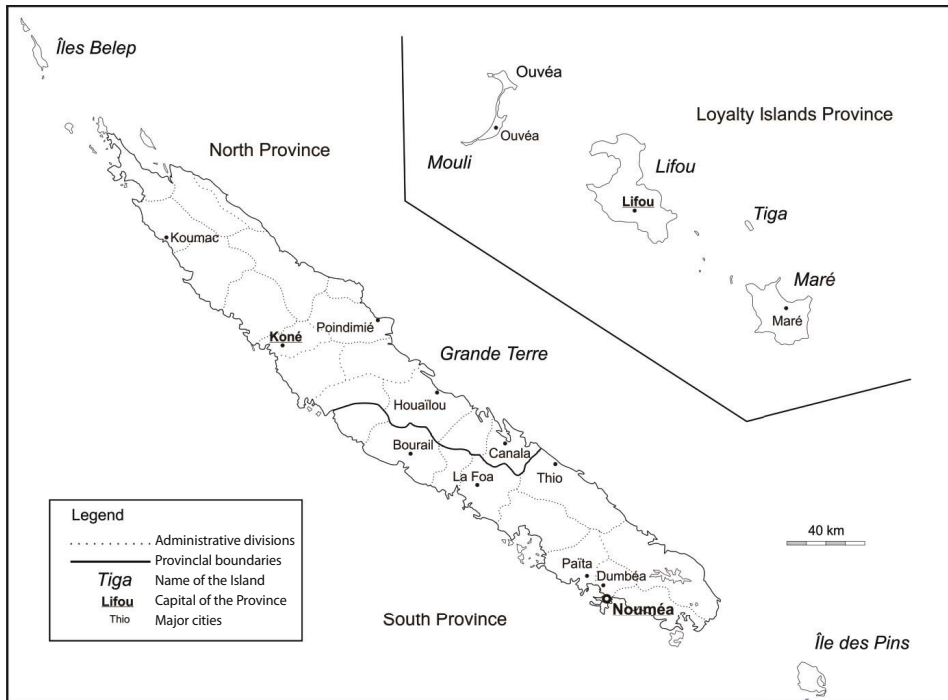
living in its military bases, was the time of awakening of national consciousness and the anti-French movement and protests.

ON THE ROAD TO AUTONOMY

The Constitution of the French Fourth Republic (Article 74) of 1946 marked a new chapter in the history of French colonies. The granting of the status of *territoires d'outre-mer* – TOM (overseas territory) not only changed its administrative organization, but also provided New Caledonia with the opportunity to gain greater autonomy, which is the vestibule of independence. Already in 1939, the archipelago got one place in the French Senate. The repeal of *Le Code de l'indigénat* put an end to almost all the restrictions, and the Act of 23 May 1951 gave greater voting right, which in 1957 was extended to all indigenous people. The year 1956 saw the establishment of local government and the introduction of New Caledonia's own currency – the franc of the Eastern Pacific. New sea and air connections with Europe, started in the 1950s, helped to overcome the geographic alienation. Slogans of the *Union Caledonienne* – the Caledonian Union – gained popularity, emphasizing that, despite ethnic diversity, the inhabitants of the archipelago are one nation. This idea was noble, but it did not last long. In the seventies, the concept of the New-Caledonian nation attenuated, and the creation of the Committee for the Independence led to political divisions. Having begun at that time, the discussion of sovereignty was to dominate the next twenty years.

The autonomy abundance peaked in the eighties. In 1986, by decision of the General Assembly of the United Nations, New Caledonia was entered on the list of dependent territories [Rumley 2006: 235]. This was also the beginning of a series of political tensions with the metropolis, which again aroused separatist aspirations. During these events, the lack of interest on the part of the metropolitan government met with criticism of President Mitterrand, thereby exacerbating the cohabitation crisis [Baszkiewicz 1997: 178]. In the referendum, organized in September 1987, the inhabitants of New Caledonia almost unanimously (98.3%) opted for continuing the centuries-old relationship with the metropolis. The fact that only 59% of eligible chose to vote casts a shadow over the representativeness of this referendum.

In 1988, the question of a possible voting on the future political status of the island has been postponed to a ten-year transitional period. Signed by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 1998, the so-called *Nouméa* agreement extended the powers of the government of New Caledonia and defined a catalogue of new powers that France was going to grant to the territory in subsequent years. In 1998, New Caledonia has finally got the status of *territoire d'outre-mer*, thereby entering a relationship of free association with France [Baszkiewicz 1997: 242]. Thus, New Caledonia received administrative independence and the ability to have its own representatives in the French parliament.



Source: author's own study.

Figure 1. Today's administrative divisions and urban centres of New Caledonia

KANAKS – THE NEW-CALEDONIAN CHOSEN PEOPLE

Today's diverse ethnic population of New Caledonia is the result of long-term mixing of populations from Asia, Europe and people originating from regions of Oceania and the Indian Ocean. The first inhabitants of the archipelago are assumed to be the *Austronésiens* who came here about three thousand years ago from south-east Asia [Fontinelle, Aufray 2008: 1469]. The descendants of the subsequently formed culture *Canaque* – the Kanaks – are now considered to be the indigenous people of New Caledonia. Originally, the term “Kanak” was used to denote all indigenous communities living on islands of Oceania. Since the 1960s, it is used mainly for the indigenous New Caledonians and also, for movements of autonomy calling their homeland *Kanaky*. The term “Kanak” is derived from the Hawaiian and means “a human” [Darot 1997: 12]. The second historical term for the population of the archipelago is *Caldoche*, which refers to people of European descent. G. Foster once wrote about the inhabitants of the archipelago sympathetically noting that among all the peoples of the South Seas, he had never encountered such a gentle, peace-minded, and trusting people [Foster, 2007: 234]. He argued, therefore, that regardless of the place of

origin, human beings have the same capabilities in matters of intellect, emotion and imagination [Kleingeld 1999: 516]. While trading with local tribes and converting them to Christianity, the Europeans have given them names and approximately determined their numbers: *Arama* (3 thous.), *Bondé* (3 thous.), *Mouélébé* (5 thous.), *Pouma* (2 500) and *Yenguène* (8 thous.) [Brainne 1854: 4-5]. Studying the diversity of pre-colonial tribes in the 1950s, M. H. Lenormand also listed the following communities: *Nenema*, *Pemboa*, *Ouebia*, *Ouma*, *Panemat*, *Ouagap*, *Poyes*, *Atinen*, *Ndoubéa* (from the area around *Nouméa*), *Nangara*, *Réké* and a group from the Isle of Pines – *Kunié* [Lenormand 1953: 245]. Just as in the pre-French days, the Kanaks are also today divided into many tribes, whose number is estimated to be 320 or more. During the colonization time in the nineteenth century, the Kanaks were used for forced labour, and as a result of slave trade they were also sent to Australia, Fiji, India, Japan and South Africa. Difficult living conditions combined with the unknown in Oceania diseases caused the advancing process of depopulation of indigenous people. In order to provide living space for the incoming settlers and former inmates of penitentiary centres, the colonial authorities began the process of the Kanak's resettlement to the mountainous regions of the island. This was the main cause of the 1878 uprising, briskly suppressed by the French. As a result of all these actions, by the end of the nineteenth century, the indigenous New Caledonians occupied only about 10% of the area of the largest island – *Grande Terre*. In the early 1950s, the Kanaks were given the right to vote, followed by the right to leave the designated reserves.

A specific expression of protest against the colonial policy of marginalization and isolation in the post-colonial reality is the *Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS)* – The Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front founded in 1984. The first and major postulate of *FLNKS* was a proposal to organize a referendum in July 1985 on independence for the archipelago [Ager 1996: 40–41]. The growing political tensions with the former metropolis that began in that year due to the murder of the Eloi Machero movement leader, forced President Mitterrand to make a commitment of giving greater autonomy to New Caledonia. However, already in 1986, Paris hastily withdrew from this commitment. As demonstrated by the events of 1988, it proved impossible to avoid brute-force solutions. Nineteen Kanaks were killed in clashes with the French gendarmes. It is assumed that the so-called Massacre of *Ouvéa* was the reason for the emergence of a first real forum for discussion between the French government, the descendants of the settlers and the indigenous community. Being the witness to that time, the agreement of *Matignon Accord* decided that the question of the political future of the archipelago should be put to a referendum vote, which was scheduled for 1998. Importantly, it also emphasizes that Kanaks are not beneficiaries of the colonial past, they are a minority in their own country and inhabit mainly underdeveloped rural areas. Already in 1989, there was a serious danger of breaking the elaborated agreement when Kanak leaders were killed in May: Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yeiwéné Yeiwéné. Signed between *FLNKS* and the French government in May 1998, *Nouméa Accord* secured limited autonomy

for a twenty-year transition period and the solution to the political affiliation should be expected in this decade [Rękawek 2011: 57].

A serious threat to the Kanak community is its increasing acculturation, which began still in colonial times due to missionary activities. Most of contemporary Kanaks belong to Christian churches, mainly the Protestant Church. Only a small percentage of the community practice indigenous beliefs. According to their belief, the holy sea provides fish, the primary ingredient in the regional diet. Ecological thinking is part of this belief and it is so strong that if fish populations decline, fishing is reduced or temporarily discontinued. Their commitment to the environmental protection is also expressed by collaboration between the Kanaks and environmental organizations in the protection of sea water and coral reefs.

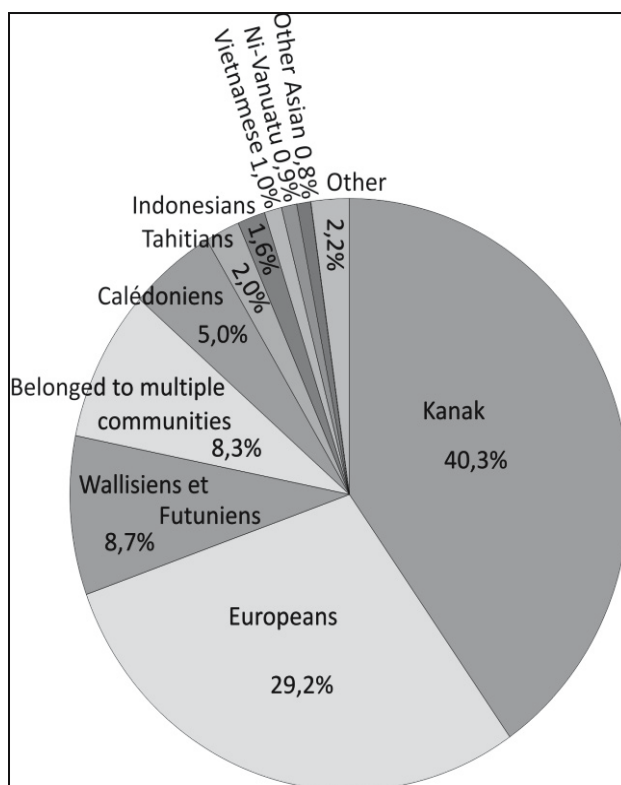
DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

In the period 1946–1983, the population increased to more than double, from 68,400 thousand to 149,400 thousand [Rallu 1985: 740]. In 2010, the population of New Caledonia was 248,731 thousand people (13 persons/km²). As in other areas of overseas France, gradual ageing of the population can be observed. In the late 1980s, an average citizen was 23 years old, while in 2005, the average age was already 28 years. According to demographic projections developed by the *Institut de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (ISEE)*, it is highly probable that in 2030, the population of the archipelago will be ranging between 296 and 334 thousand [Broustet 2005: 4]. Between 1996 and 2004, the share of the population aged 60 years and more increased from 7.5% to 9.4%.

Today, the population growth has decreased, but still remained positive at a level of 1.9% *per annum*. This population growth is rather unevenly distributed. Since 2004, the number of citizens in the southern province increased by 22%, while in the case of the Loyalty Islands, the growth rate was only 7%. One household consists of 3.5 persons on average, while the surface area of housing increased by 25% since 1996. The fertility rate has dropped from 3.2 children per woman in the late 1980s to 2.2 in 2004. At the same time, the average life expectancy in New Caledonia has increased by five years, from 68 to 72 years for men and from 73 to 79 years for women. The youngest citizens remained the inhabitants of the archipelago Loyalty Islands with average age of 27.5 years. With regard to gender, 50.5% of the population were men (102 per 100 women) [*Recensement général de la population en Nouvelle-Calédonie – 2004*, 2004].

In fifteen years the population of the Southern Province has increased by 47.0% from 111, 735 to 164, 235 inhabitants. The largest growth rate of 6.1%, was observed in the municipality *Farino*, which is the smallest administration unit of that province. In the capital, it has been observed that in thirty years there has been a doubling of the population. In other municipalities, the situation was as follows: *Boulouparis*

(3.3%), *Sarramea* (2.8%), *Yate* (2.1%), *Foa* (1.8%), *Ile des Pins* (1.2%), *Bourail* (1.1%), *Moindou* (0.7%) and *Thio* (0.6%). In the Northern Province, in the years 1989–1996, there was a significant decline in population. The highest population growth was observed in the municipalities *Pouembout* (2.6%) and *Hienghène* (2.1%). Also, since 1989, there was a downward trend in the Loyalty Islands of respectively 10.9% in the base year, 10.6% in 1996 and 9.6% in 2004 [*Recensement général de la population en Nouvelle-Calédonie – 2004, 2004*].



Source: own calculations based on P. Rivoilan, D. Broustet, *Recensement de la population en Nouvelle-Calédonie en 2009*, Institut de la statistique et des études économiques de Nouvelle-Calédonie, N° 1338 – February 2011, electronic version: <http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/ipweb/ip1338/ip1338.pdf> (accessed on 16.11.2012).

Figure 2. Ethnic diversity of the population of New Caledonia in 2009

The ethnic diversity is dominated by Melanesian indigenous people – Kanak (Fig. 2), followed by Europeans with French, Italian, British and German roots (37%), Polynesians (8%) from *Wallis et Futuna* and Tahiti and, to lesser extent, immigrants from Indonesia (4%), Vanuatu, Vietnam and India. Almost 60% of the population of New Caledonia live in urban centres [Rettinger, Rettinger 2008: 296]. Descendants of at least two generations of European settlers are referred to as *calédoniens* [Bodmer, 2010].

LANGUAGE WEALTH

The constitution [Article 2 of the Constitution of the French Republic of 4 October 1958] states that the official language of New Caledonia is French, in addition to the commonly used 33 Polynesian and Melanesian dialects. However, for 60% of the population, the metropolitan language takes a secondary position [Miroux 1999: 21]. The accepted rule is that most meetings of municipal councils in the Loyalty Islands Province are held in local languages. French is also the language of instruction and examination in public and private schools, except for the justified needs of the application of regional languages. A law adopted by the National Assembly on December, 13th 2000 [Loi d'orientation pour l'outre-mer (loi 2000–1207)], being the law in force in all the overseas territories, states in Article 33 that the state and local governments are obliged to respect, protect and maintain the knowledge and practices of indigenous communities. Article 34 emphasizes that in non-European French territories, regional languages are part of the cultural heritage of the nation, hence the concern for their preservation and further development.

An important regional initiative in this respect was the development of an integrated plan in 1991 regarding teaching mother tongues. The plan has been in force since 1994 in all types of schools. For example, in the Northern Province, the plan was carried out within the action *Phax*, providing five hours of regional language lessons in a week. The Centre for Research and Educational Documentation opened in 1978 is responsible for the implementation of the educational mechanisms in different languages and for preparing teaching materials. Since 2002, one of the priority actions in the Southern Province has been the popularisation of the kanak language, and four years later, all fourteen schools providing basic education had a bilingual teacher. Also at the *Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (University of New Caledonia), it is obligatory since 1999 to teach two regional languages: *ajië* and *dechu*. The idea of a Kanak Language Academy was born, with the aim to educate future teachers for elementary schools and secondary schools. The activities of the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* in Paris such as teaching the *dechu* language also contributed to popularisation of linguistic diversity. Signed also by France, the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, emphasizes the need to change the language policy of New Caledonia. Only a few of the provisions of the Charter were implemented, mainly in the areas of administration, justice, education and the media. In particular, the last of the specified is a controversial issue. Broadcasting services provided by the National Association of Radio and Television Abroad are broadcast mainly in French. This also applies to private radio stations, which got certain additional emission restrictions [*Nouvelle-Calédonie. La politique linguistique*].

Analysing the language policy of New Caledonia, the significant role of English is worth mentioning. After all, in the geopolitical context, New Caledonia is a part of the South Pacific, which is home to almost 25 million English-speaking population. English is the official language of Australia, New Zealand, Solomon Islands,

Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Tonga, Samoa, American Samoa, Niue, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Guam, Micronesia, Hawaii and Fiji. In addition to New Caledonia, French is the official language only in the territories of Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and Vanuatu³. Thus, the position of English in the contemporary linguistic mosaic of the area remains dominant.

THE COLONIAL ROOTS OF THE ECONOMY

The wealth of raw materials: nickel, chromium, copper, manganese, iron, lead and cobalt, made New Caledonia the richest region of Melanesia in this respect [Glodek 1967: 377]. The archipelago has almost 25% of the world's nickel – the main export commodity (in 2006, it accounted for 94% of the total export structure), and due to the fact that it is one of the components of stainless steel and due to the growing since 2000 global demand for iron, the demand for this mineral is consistently maintained at a high level. Until the year 1890, when Canada discovered richer deposits of nickel, New Caledonia occupied the unparalleled first place in the extraction of raw materials. The discovery of the commodity, made in 1865 by Jules Garnier, was the beginning of the mining industry, started in 1873; and in 1878, the first company dedicated to exploitation was established, the *Société Le Nickel – SNL* [Musset 1936: 552]. By the end of the nineteenth century, *SNL* was the world's largest exporter of nickel [Aldrich, Connell 1992: 46]. Operating today in the mining industry of New Caledonia, companies Eramet, Inco and Falconbridge are running their extraction activities mainly in *Thio* and *Népoui*. *SNL's* predecessor at the end of the last decade employed 2, 400 people, being the main tax payer of the archipelago [Le nickel en Nouvelle-Calédonie]. However, the presence of nickel has not always determined the economic well-being, despite the lively trade and the many natural resources, the archipelago was in economic infancy until the early twentieth century. It was mainly due to the fact that nickel ore was exported to France where the pure metal was extracted. In 2009, the extraction of the raw material was 107 thousand t, and its reserves were estimated at 7.100 thousand t [*Nickel – USGS Mineral Resources Program*: 109].

The agricultural sector should be regarded as relatively underdeveloped, mainly due to the deficit of arable land. In the period of French colonization the basic crop was sugar cane, and since the 1860s, first sugar factories began to be established [Saussol 1986: 89–92]. To the most popular crops belong taro and jam. Other cultivations include coconut palms, cotton, copra, corn, tobacco and coffee, which, next to nickel and chromium, is the most important export product. Livestock farming is predominantly sheep and cattle breeding. Despite this, the territory of New Caledonia

³ In addition to English and Bislama.

is not entirely independent in respect of food, and therefore it is necessary to import some products from Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

According to the economic ranking *DROM-COM*⁴, the economy of New Caledonia was one of the strongest and most dynamic at the same time. This is shown by the size of the GDP for the year 2007 amounting to almost 6.5 billion euro, and very high rates of GDP *per capita* for this year – 25, 500 euro. In 2008, the unemployment rate was only 4.8%, while economic growth was 5.5%. Other important sources of income included the tourist industry, which in 2006 brought 142 million \$ [Rettinger, Rettinger 2008: 297] and money transfers from the mainland, regarded by many analysts as engines of growth. Their value in 2007 exceeded 121 billion CFP francs. Economic redistribution of wealth remains very uneven, however, and much of the population, mainly Kanak, seemed to be beyond its reach. Every year, the number of young and educated people who could not find a job at the local labour market has been growing, which in the near future may cause social tensions [Miroux 1999: 19].

POLITICAL FUTURE

There are plans to hold a referendum between 2014 and 2019, in which the community of this overseas territory of France will decide on its possible independence. The issue of sovereignty has divided the New Caledonians, an example of which was the so-called dispute over the flag in 2010 when the idea was to use two flags: the French and Kanak one.

The political union of France and New Caledonia, continuing since 1853, is entering a decisive phase in the current decade. More autonomy, and perhaps independence? How beneficial will it be to break the political and economic ties with the former metropolis? Is it entirely possible? It is difficult to predict the extent to which New Caledonia will remain the beneficiary of the changes that the near future will bring. One of the main problems would be the access to the land. Controversial divisions of the colonial era, both in the past and today, generate a sense of injustice and exploitation. The indigenous people hold only 165 thousand hectares, while the small Melanesian population, remaining unmistakable minority, controls around 370 thousand hectares.

One should also consider if keeping of New Caledonia by France is an expression of post-colonial splendour, or the actual historical and cultural ties? Only during the time of Third Republic, the total area of the French colonies in the world has increased twelvefold [Deruga 1957: 26]. Just before the outbreak of World War I, the French colonial community was the second largest in the world, just after the British one. Despite rescue attempts within the French Union, and later the French Community, the colonial empire has broken down in the 1960s and 1970s. Only four

⁴ Départements et régions d'outre mer – Collectivités d'outre-mer.

so-called *Départements et régions d'outre-mer* – overseas departments and regions have maintained an integral unity with the Republic: Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, *Réunion* and one overseas department: Mayotte. Other sections of *France d'outre-mer* are the small in area *collectivités d'outre-mer* – overseas communities (*Wallis-et-Futuna, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, Polynésie française*), *Terres australes et antarctiques françaises* – The French Southern and Antarctic Lands and, *territoires à statuts spécifiques* – territories with special status. The non-metropolitan France in the twenty-first century is nothing like its colonial predecessor. The small fragments scattered across the globe, are the only testimony to the wealth of the imperial past, and New Caledonia is an exotic addition.

Also the mineral resources of the archipelago, particularly nickel deposits should be considered. The 34% increase in raw material prices recorded in 2010 shows the rising demand that in the coming years is likely to exceed supply. However, non-renewable natural resources will eventually deplete, thus making the economic future of those islands dependant on natural resources would be a short-term strategy. There is also the question of how former colony would cope without the financial support of France?

CONCLUSIONS

Colonized in 1853 by the French, New Caledonia is at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century still strongly connected with the former metropolis by political, economic and cultural bonds. Introduced in 1887 and partially in force until 1946, *Le Code de l'indigénat* was an important determinant of social divisions, leading to the supremacy of the French settlers over indigenous peoples, and its effects are still present today. Despite the multi-ethnic community being the product of colonization, today Kanaks belong to the cultural and demographic majority sharing the archipelago with a population of European and Asian descent. The analysis of the economic situation revealed that New Caledonia is the most stable French territory outside Europe in this respect. We should notice that the economic redistribution of wealth is uneven, providing a source of social tension. As shown in the study, the co-existence between different ethnic groups is historically complex and despite all stabilization efforts made at the end of the 1980s and 1990s, it remains a very delicate structure. In response to the question about the political future of the archipelago it should be noted that it also remains highly uncertain. Granting full sovereignty to the territory would imply obvious changes in the political functioning of the community *sui generis*, but the newly created Kanak state would remain a multinational structure. Thus, the escape from the colonial past in the multifaceted relationship France – New Caledonia seems to be impossible. In referendums held so far, New Caledonians always chose greater autonomy. Will they be ready to reach for independence in the next one? Despite the large uncertainty, one can predict that New

Caledonia is not ready for actual decolonization and its political ties with the former metropolis remain strong.

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