

Kanaky: In New Caledonia, the long tradition of songs of revolt

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This Sunday, November 4, the New Caledonians will go to the polls to decide on the independence of their archipelago.

Many Australians, who are used to spending their holidays there in order to taste French culture in the middle of the Pacific, are unaware of the continuing struggle of the Kanaks (the Melanesian indigenous people) for their sovereignty since their colonization by France. in 1853. This struggle has often been told through music.

Our research focuses on the role of music in political struggles in Melanesia, particularly in West Papua and New Caledonia. Throughout Melanesia, music is not only a testimony to ancient and living cultures, but also a form of celebration of the resilience, action and resilience of indigenous peoples.

Songs of resistance

At the moment, in the street I saw my children
Progressing shouting "Freedom! "
The school was naked, where are the children?
In the streets, the city was showing

Written in 1985, these lines, taken from the song *Liberté* by Jean-Pierre Swan - the pioneering voice of the Kanak protest - refer to *events* . In other words, the bloody civil war that took place in New Caledonia in the 1980s, which culminated with the massacre of 19 Kanaks by the French commandos in 1988 and the assassination in 1989 of the great Melanesian pacifist Jean-Marie Tjibaou.

Resistance to French rule has certainly weakened over time, but was revived in 1969 with the formation of the Red Foulards, a political group that combined left anticolonial and cultural nationalism of the Pacific.

The Red Scarves were led by Nidoish Naisseline, heir to a great native chief. The arrest and imprisonment of this leader in September 1969 sparked a riot and culminated in the so-called Kanak revival, a period of intense resistance to foreign occupation.

This movement was immortalized in the song *Jamulo Atai*, whose lyrics were written by Naisseline himself. In the title, *Jamulo* corresponds to the nickname of Naisseline and *Atai* in the name of the leader of the resistance Kanak in the nineteenth century. By associating his name with that of *Atai*,

Naisseline appropriated the prestige of the great leader.

The lyrics of the song evoke precisely this quest for independence.

Nearly a century earlier, in 1878, Atai led an uprising in which 1200 Melanesians were slain. Atai was assassinated and his head sent to France as a trophy.

In the mid-1980s, the funk-rock group of the Kanak musician and intellectual Theo Menango, Yata (Ataï in reverse) was inspired by these tragic events to commemorate the murdered hero in a song where he is compared to Christ, not without provocation:

Ataï the pure, the hard the great saint
As Christ your blood has flowed
Ataï your name must last
As Christ your work is immortal
Ataï, oh, you show the way to follow
In your footsteps, freedom!

Trauma of the past

The relentless drive to dismantle Kanak culture and put an end to anti-colonial resistance gave rise in the 1980s to the *kaneka* musical genre , which combines the pride and defense of black rights of Jamaican reggae with rhythm of Aboriginal percussion instruments.

Many *kaneka* songs evoke traumatic events and past and present injustices. Here is a selection:

“Ouvanu”, by the kaneka group Waan , commemorates the guillotine decapitation of 10 Kanak men at Ouvanu in Puébo, north of Grande Terre (the big island of New Caledonia), by order of the colonial governor, in 1868.

The **“Loulou”** lament **of the Kaneka Bwanjep group** refers to the settler-led night ambush at Wan'yaat in 1984 to trap several cars with high-ranking Kanaks [who were shot dead](#) .

Among the ten victims were two brothers of the Kanak visionary leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou. One of them was nicknamed Loulou.

He was shot in 1985 by police a few miles from where Chief Atai had fallen, 110 years earlier.

A music festival

A year ago, we flew to Lifou on the Loyalty Islands to attend the Fest Mela, a musical weekend organized in Hapetra by *Kaneka* superstar [Edou Wamai](#) , who lives there.

The festival was run by the Black Sistaz, a West Papuan group based in Melbourne, made up of the three daughters of members of the Black Brothers, a well-known group that fought for the independence of West Papua in the 1980s.

The list of local bands included “Kool Groove” which played a local style of folk guitar-based music. Draped in the Kanak flag, members of the group expressed pride in their language, culture and future nation.

On Lifou, we were received by the leader of Hapetra, who asked that the “Black Sistaz” sing for him. They agreed by performing a touching song *a cappella* from Biak Island (West Papua).

While the Melanesian nations are still under colonial rule, the West Papuans and Kanaks consider their destinies intimately linked - each population believes that others can help it achieve sovereignty on its own soil. Kanak musicians also composed West Papuan independence songs, such as [“Free West Papua”](#) from the *kaneka* acoustic group “Lyric Kanak Gong”.

In Melanesia, at crucial moments when the destiny of the First Peoples of the Pacific is played out, as in this week’s referendum, the songs can recall past sacrifices and help to imagine possible futures.

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