THE IMPACT OF DECOLONISATION ON KANAK GIRLS’ SCHOOL SUCCESS (LIFOU, NEW CALEDONIA)

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Of the political and social challenges faced by the Melanesian people of New Caledonia, the transformation of traditionally established relations between the sexes is not the least. (Salomon 2000: 311)

Indeed, in response to the Kanak independence movement’s demands, New Caledonia has embarked on a gradual decolonisation process. In 1988, fearing a war of decolonisation, the French State, the Rassemblement Pour la Calédonie dans la République [RPCR] party (opposed to independence in New Caledonia) and the Kanak Socialist Liberation Front (pro-independence) signed the Matignon Agreements. These agreements made provision for part of customary land to be given back to the Kanak people, and for a policy of positive discrimination in the creation and development of Kanak areas as well as in setting up decentralised decision-making institutions, the Provinces. Ten years later, the Noumea Agreements (1998) acknowledged colonisation and made provision for France’s withdrawal that would be voted on in successive referendums. The aim of these measures was to create conditions in which the European population, both that of long-established colonial descent and more recent immigrants, the Kanak population (almost half the total population), as well as the immigrant populations from the Pacific and Asia, could live together. Among the measures taken from 1988 onwards to create a new economic equilibrium, the access of Kanak men and women to better schooling, university courses and employment in the territory had considerable impact on the everyday life of the Kanak people, particularly on the gender system.1 According to Salomon (2000), Kanak women’s involvement in the independence movement and the creation of Women’s Rights Delegations has been part of the driving force behind transformations in social relations between the sexes that had been marked by a high rate of violence against women, their exclusion from decision making and an ideology of women’s impurity. There are many signs of changes in the gender system: Kanak women have more and more frequent recourse to common law in order to divorce or file complaints for sexual and marital violence, and are involved in women’s associations and in politics. Some women also directly contest male domination and assert, individually or in associations, that it is the sign of “former times” that “some Kanak men behave like colonisers
with their wives". In 2004, for the first time, women officially claimed the right to participate in certain customary organisations. Far from advocating a break with their Kanak culture, in the last few years women have dared to publicly call for an evolution in "custom", as Déwé Gorodé, a woman leader of the independence movement and writer, emphasised:

To say that women must not talk in customary institutions ‘because it has always been like that’ is a dangerous position to the extent that we ourselves are no longer as before. [If the customary Senate, a recent creation, refuses women’s participation] they will turn to political institutions, urban and rural districts, the Provinces, they will take legal action in the white people’s court, instead of appealing to customary justice. (Gorodé 2005: 24)

On the basis of my research, I argue that one of the main sources of these changes lies in the major transformations that have taken place in young Kanak people’s, and particularly young Kanak girls’, conditions of education and socialisation at school and in the family since the rise of the independence movement. These transformations have had decisive effects on women’s mentalities and economic autonomy.

My specific study deals with the transformations experienced by girls and boys in family upbringing and schooling on Lifou, one of the Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia, from 1945 to the present day. Girls from the Loyalty Islands used to be openly discriminated against at school; before 1989, they represented only 35 percent of successful baccalauréat candidates in the Loyalty Islands (Washetine 1991). (Baccalauréat is the French examination at the end of secondary school, the lycée. The lycée is the last three years of secondary school or “senior high school”, before entering higher education.) Yet, between 2002 and 2005 they represented 72.34 percent of successful baccalauréat candidates from the Loyalty Islands’ lycée.

How has the gendered socialisation of young people from Lifou evolved between their grandparents’ generation and that of today’s youth? How does the typical Melanesian ideal of separate spaces and roles for the sexes from puberty onward endure or not in schools? Why did families begin to massively encourage girls’ schooling in the 1990s when it had been considered pointless in their grandmothers’ time? How are the education and the socialisation of young people influenced by wider changes and how do these influence the gender system?

After briefly explaining how and why the research was done and who the participants were, I shall describe the main characteristics of gendered socialisation in the family on Lifou. I shall then attempt to show the impact of the independence movement’s demands in the 1980s, and of the 1988 Matignon Agreements on young women’s education at school and within their
family. I shall examine how the international phenomenon of girls’ success at school (Baudelot and Establet 2001) is increasing on this Melanesian island, aided by the process of decolonisation and radically changing gender norms and expectations.

RESEARCH CONDITIONS

During my first study of women’s associations on Lifou (Nicolas 2003), I noted that women under 40 took very little part in these associations because they did not have the same conception of gendered identities as their elders. Although they respected the work of these associations, they subscribed very little to the idea conveyed by their mothers and grandmothers that women are above all “mothers of the people” and that they have a role to play in public life which is complementary to that of men. They seemed to demand more economic and political participation in “building the country” as well as less submission to their husbands. I hypothesised that this evolution in gender norms was the result of an enduring change in conditions of socialisation between the generations concerned.

During a second period of fieldwork in 2004, I decided to interview men and women from different generations and professions, living in Lifou or Noumea, on two subjects: firstly, on the gendered education they had received or given within their family and, secondly, on their experience of schooling. I studied the joint and separate education given to children of both sexes (i.e., the deliberate acts of training young people) as well as their gender-differentiated socialisation, which has to do with largely unconscious processes of interiorising ways of thinking, feeling and acting (Lahire 2001). I very soon realised to what extent school space, in the form of the Christian boarding schools, has conveyed very strong gender norms and continues to do so in the secular, mixed schools. Thereafter, I based my work on the abundant literature available about schooling in New Caledonia (but whose gendered aspect had not yet been studied) and on interviews with Kanak and non-Kanak people involved in education. All of them stressed the fact that young Kanak women, particularly those from Lifou, are more successful at school than their male counterparts. Since 1993 statistics incorporating ethnicity have been specifically disallowed, so it was difficult to check these assertions. I therefore enlisted the help of individuals who provided me with lists of successful baccaulauréat candidates in the Loyalty Islands’ lycée in order to do my own gender-based statistics on this lycée attended only by Loyalty Island pupils. Other people involved in education also gave me their unofficial evaluations of Kanak female and male students’ success in different examinations and of their careers in tertiary education. These statistics all confirm the fact that today Kanak girls from the Loyalty Islands have a high
rate of school success, considerably above that of Kanak boys from the Loyalty Islands. In the field, I benefited from a great deal of support for this study on Kanak girls’ success at school because the question of schooling is still a burning issue in the stakes of decolonisation.

GENDERED SOCIALIZATION IN THE FAMILY AND THE LEARNING OF CLAN KNOWLEDGE

Learning to become a “real person”
The people of Lifou often draw a parallel between school learning and clan learning. Since the end of the 19th century, the young people of Lifou have grown up in schools and boarding schools (both religious and secular) and in the family; “We, the Kanak people, have two schools. Children go to the French school but, when they come home, they are also taught many things.” (Interview with Siwaneqatr Qenenöj, former clan chief, 4 September 2005, Lifou.)

Children (nekönatr lit. ‘child persons’) are raised in family space to become on their wedding day nyipi atr ‘real people, adults’. A child person becomes a real person through a socialisation process during which he or she learns “who he or she is”, that is to say what their origins are (the places in which their ancestors dwell), their kinship network (paternal and maternal), their hierarchical position and therefore the strategies they will be able to employ during their existence (Bensa 1995). Old people like to say that at the heart of the notion of an atr ‘person’ is to be found the notion of knowing: to be a person involves actively knowing all the elements of the relationship network of which he or she is a part.

Boys and girls are destined to become real persons. From birth until the first signs of puberty, girls and boys first learn to speak, then to know the names of their kin members, as well as the rules of politeness. This is done mainly with parents and grandparents either in a nuclear family or in a more extended one on Lifou or in Noumea, though sometimes children may live for a time with an aunt. When children reach the age of ten, their parents start to tell them the clans’ stories and to show them the taboo places where the ancestors dwell. From birth until the age of three or four, little difference is made between children, particularly in the way they are dressed and, before the first signs of puberty (until about the age of ten), there is no problem about girls playing with their male counterparts. The main difference in treatment is that girls are often less spoilt than their brothers because the boys bring much more prestige to their mothers and clans than do girls, who are destined to be given to other families. Girls are also frequently required to help their mothers with domestic chores.
The first separation of these sexes
At the first signs of puberty in girls, the two sexes are separated in order to form ‘real men’ and ‘real women’; girls have to stay with their mothers to learn how to do household work, while boys move around a lot. One of the aims of this moving around is to get to know their kin. The elders claim distinguishing and establishing a hierarchy between the two sexes is the best possible form of social organisation, the guarantee of a balanced society. In this, men and women form two groups who must be educated differently and fulfil different roles.

Boys learn to speak in public and to have full knowledge of the myths. They wander around in age groups, not only testing their physical strength and solidarity but also breaking the rules. The rites, which entail cutting a little boy’s hair at about the age of four with his male kin and then his beard at about 18-years-old with the older boys of his generation, have no equivalent for girls. Some old women from Lifou told me that when they had had their first menstrual period they had drunk “medicine” (a mixture of plants) with their aunts and were given advice about their new fertility. This rudimentary rite seems to have disappeared.

Girls are brought up to become docile future wives and hard-working mothers, and to be called föe (meaning ‘woman, female’ as well as ‘husband/wife’—a fundamental referent in female identity). They are destined to bear many children and raise them, feed the whole family and do virtually all the domestic work. From puberty until they are married, they remain in women’s space where they help their mothers, aunts and sisters, who generally attach great importance to their duty of humility and obedience to their elders and to their future husband. Many young women today question this seclusion and take the liberty of going out, with or without their parents’ consent. Nevertheless, the social ideal of the hard-working and obedient young woman remains very present in all generations.

Do young women learn the clan stories?
Ethnological texts (Bensa and Rivierre 1982, Leenhardt 1947), as well as Kanak texts (Tjibaou and Missote 1976, Mwa Vee 1996), tend to emphasise the predominant place of knowledge and intellectual activity in Kanak culture, particularly learning the myths, the social groups’ political stories. These texts only refer to boys’ upbringing. Anna Paini (1993) asserted that women only have access to knowledge concerning the rules of collective living, politeness and respect. During my first period of fieldwork in 2003, I therefore believed that women were excluded from most clan knowledge. Local men had told me that women knew the clan stories less well as they were not present during
the main ceremonies. On Lifou, it is men who make speeches in public and it is they who represent the chiefdoms; women are utterly excluded from their most important meetings. I had therefore hypothesised that women did not have access to this prized intellectual learning, as was the case among the Baruya of New Guinea (Godelier 1982).

Apparently this hypothesis was wrong. Though, from puberty on, girls and boys are taught different roles in separate spaces, girls are not necessarily excluded from all clan knowledge. They learn the origin myths (*qan*) and the principal stories (*ifejicatre*: referring to both humorous tales based on certain origin myths and edifying stories) of their father’s clan. Their father also shows them where his clan’s places are, especially if they are of high-ranking lineage. They learn the genealogies too, particularly the matrimonial alliances. It is said of women that they are the “family’s memory”, that they remember in detail the stories told them by their parents. Though they are denied access to the ceremonies considered to be the most sacred, and exclusively male, where geopolitical knowledge is activated, they generally have knowledge from several clans, because the other in-marrying women of their family gladly tell them the stories (myths and genealogies) of the clans they come from.

They also learn about the stories and the relationship network of their husband’s family. According to a politically committed woman from Lifou:

> Of course we know! I know my stories but as soon as we arrive in our husband’s house, it’s the first thing we ask, we have to know who is who, where the places are, the paths, because we’re said to be unimportant in custom, so if on top of that we don’t know…. To be able to prepare ‘customs’, to give our husband advice! (Anonymous, 10 September 2005, Lifou)

Women use this transversal knowledge when choosing their son’s wife, but also to advise their husband and brothers or during a regency if a clan chief dies. Women then are not excluded from all clan knowledge but from publicly or politically exercising the *right to speak*. Neither do they seem to be very involved in knowledge concerning war; likewise knowledge of certain types of medicine and dance are exclusively male. How does the typical Melanesian ideal of separate spaces and roles for the sexes from puberty on persist or not in schools?
Send to school or civilise (1840-1946)?

Before analysing the period between 1946 and today, a look at the development of school education is called for. In the Loyalty Islands, the first schools appeared with the arrival of the London Missionary Society missionaries in the 1840s. According to R.K. Howe (1978), the population of these islands showed great interest in reading and those who had learned to read gave little lessons themselves.

The rapid transition in the Loyalty Islands from an illiterate to an educated society, was the result of the remarkable fact that the islanders taught each other to a great extent. The LMS missionaries provided them with printed alphabets and texts and they learned to read and write as day pupils before 1864 as well as in the boarding schools and seminaries and from then on the movement snowballed…. In the first years of contact, printed texts were often considered talismans which magically enabled people to learn ideas. Books and brochures were prestigious objects. (Howe 1978: 173)

In the early days of schooling, the Loyalty Islands were the Melanesian zones with the highest level of school attendance in New Caledonia. For example, in 1946 Lifou counted five official (secular) schools (i.e., state, republican schools), four Protestant schools and from 1910 two further Protestant schools financed partly by secular funds, and three Roman Catholic schools.

The teaching given to the autochthonous population in the state schools at the time reflected colonial policy: “From the colonial viewpoint, it was a question of domesticating the ‘natives’ in order to make of them people sufficiently ‘civilised’ to serve the cause of colonisation without questioning it” (Pineau-Salaün 2000: 150). “Natives” did not have the same schools as “whites”. The aim of the missionary schools was to instil into young Melanesians the principles of a Christian life and to thus enduringly convert the “pagan” populations of New Caledonia to one or other of the two competing religions.

From the 1840s to the 1950s, schooling was such that the vast majority of girls and boys received only a very rudimentary education, consisting of a minimum of theoretical instruction (reading, counting) and practical lessons. All the primary schools—secular, Catholic and Protestant—were mixed. But at the first signs of puberty young people were sent to religious boarding schools. Activities for the boys were building and agricultural work and fishing. Girls quite often remained in these boarding schools until they
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married and there they learned the different tasks of domestic work deemed necessary to the advent of civilisation: cooking, sewing, hygiene, looking after the house and garden, household maintenance and work in the fields. While Kanak boys could be granted specific diplomas reserved for “native children”, they did not have the right to take the same exams as children of European origin. Kanak girls were not entitled to obtain qualifications at all. This schooling, consisting of a multitude of disciplinary techniques, inscribed bodies and minds with sexual identities and conditioned the education these pupils would give to their own children.

The grandmothers’ (5) school education (1946-1974)
In 1946, just after the Second World War, the Melanesian people of New Caledonia became French citizens and both men and women were able to vote, something new in France. The Code de l’Indigénat (Native Code) was abolished. Kanak people henceforth had the right to travel from one tribe to another, to form associations and trade unions and no longer had to do hard labour. From 1946 on, Kanak women had—theoretically—the right, like all other Kanaks, to take the same exams as “white people”. However, the schools on Lifou, like most other schools for Melanesians, were not capable of preparing pupils to take exams. Elderly women’s accounts attest to the continuation of the pre-war school system and how precarious it was. The women I spoke to told me they had built classrooms and worked a lot in the fields to feed the teacher, who was often the pastor or deacon, and how school cycles were very often not completed.

Before the 1970s, the vast majority of girls in Lifou left the mixed primary schools at puberty and their parents sent them to single-sex religious (Roman Catholic and Protestant) boarding schools whose aim was not to enable these young women to continue their studies. Pohnimëqatr Aluatr, for example, recounted how she learned to watch over livestock, farm the land, do housework, keep a house and garden clean and tidy, sew and cook. She told me she had worked hard with the nuns. In an earlier conversation with Anna Paini, she stated: “In the past, at school, we were told that if we refused (sexual relations with our husband) it was a sin. We were always being whipped. The slightest prank and we were whipped or made to kneel down. The father used a belt, the sister a liana, cegöl” (Paini 1993: 180-81). As well as learning to read there was housework, but also morality lessons in which girls were taught their future roles of wife and mother, and all this was conducted with great severity. The discipline and morality lessons, which encouraged girls to internalise their contempt for Kanak cultural norms incompatible with Christian life, enduringly prescribed for these girls a female identity marked by the duties of motherhood, fertility, hygiene and
constant work within the home. The missionaries considered they had to fight against these young women’s “immorality”; they forbade dancing and the use of abortive or contraceptive plants, and instilled the idea of conjugal duty in order to combat adultery (Salomon 2003). In the missionary schools it was also, and above all, a question of keeping these girls virgins until they married, which is very similar to what M. Pineau-Salaün (2000) described when writing about schools in the first half of the 20th century. This obsession was still very much alive in 1970.

M. Jolly and M. Macintyre have demonstrated that it is impossible to analyse gender in Pacific societies, actively Christianised from the 19th century onwards, without examining the impact missionaries had on the organisation and representations of sexual identities, the family, conjugality and maternity (Jolly and Macintyre 1989). On Lifou, gendered socialisation within the family and at school was in effect recycled; schoolchildren’s parents had also received a Christian education in the boarding schools and applied the educational principles they had learned at school which were again reinforced by the schools. Therefore women of this generation brought up their daughters and grand-daughters according to their own experience, commonly, but not always, conveying the popular image of a strong, courageous mother who had done her duty under difficult conditions but without complaining.

The principles of family education I described in the first part of this article are consequently not the reflection of a form of upbringing which existed before evangelisation. They were the result of the Christian upbringing received by grandfathers and grandmothers and advocated by the key customary figures, an education in which it is difficult to distinguish between what was the result of principles existing before evangelisation and what arose from adaptation to Christian precepts.

Lifou’s first girls with school qualifications

Until the 1970s, the norm for girls from Lifou apparently was not to take examinations. Most parents considered that exams were of no use to women who were meant to get married and work in the home. As Hnémêneqatr Lapacas said: “Before, girls weren’t encouraged because they were going to get married. They would be given away so parents said there’s no use. And anyway girls are meant to stay at home, it’s boys who go out to work” (Interview with 64 year old Hnemêneqatr Lapacas, translated by Siliwa Leguy, 19 August 2004, Lifou). This elderly woman gave several reasons for why girls were prevented from taking exams. The first was that at the time it seemed useless, since it was a feature of everyday life (and one of the things taught in the boarding schools) that women did not work for a wage, outside the home. Moreover, sending children away to take exams in collèges (first
four years of secondary school or “junior high school”) on the mainland entailed a huge expense for families; it was often impossible, or represented a big sacrifice, to pay the boat trip and provide school expenses. Educating a boy who was going to stay in the clan could be considered an investment while, as I was often told, educating a girl was, for parents of those days, “throwing money away”. It was the clan into which the girl would marry that would receive the benefit of this education. Moreover, one of the main problems which prevented girls from continuing their studies was that they had to leave their home island and go to collège on the main island. And it was not well thought of for girls to leave the island, while it was considered a good thing for boys. Young men of Lifou were encouraged to travel, to make money elsewhere and come back later, to such an extent that their neighbours used to nickname them ironically the “sailboards”. It was out of the question for girls to leave the island to continue their studies in mixed, secular secondary schools which were seen as potential dens of vice. And lastly, girls were often obliged to work for their family, to help a mother or aunt who had a lot of children by working in the fields or the house.

However, a few women took exams before the 1970s. Their circumstances displayed the following characteristics: they had often worked in schools, doing housework for example, before taking exams; their parents could easily move to the mainland, often Noumea, and had jobs; and they were educated in a church context, so their “morality” was not questioned. Otrenaqr Kakue, Lifou’s first female primary school teacher, was a pastor’s daughter. Denise Kacatr, who would become a senior nurse, was, as the eldest daughter, encouraged by her mother, Lifou’s first teaching auxiliary. Her mother used to say to her:

‘… if you don’t want to go out into the fields all the time, be dirty and perspire, if you want to be someone later, go to school, work hard, listen to your teachers, like that you’ll become a real woman….’ Do Neva [a Protestant school] is the light. In that school the real women and real men of tomorrow are prepared. Someone who comes from Do Neva is sure to become a real, responsible man or woman. (Interview with 57-year-old Denise Hmea Kacatr, a delegate for Women’s Rights, 31 August 2004, Lifou.)

Schooling was easier for young women who grew up in Noumea because of the proximity of collèges and because they had a tangible aim in obtaining qualifications—to find paid work afterwards. The women who had the privilege of taking exams before the 1970s generally turned to the professions of teaching and nursing taken up by “maiden ladies”, female missionaries, pastors’ wives and Roman Catholic sisters. Thus, even if these women worked, they remained in the female role of educating and caring.
FROM 1974 TO 2005: DECOLONISING SCHOOLING

The success of Lifou girls at school can only be understood in the twofold context of, on the one hand, the French state’s attempt to bring New Caledonian schools into conformity with French metropolitan ones and, on the other hand, the Kanak people’s demand for education in order to be able to play a real part in the political, economic and cultural life of New Caledonia.

1974-1987: Girls and collèges

In the early 1970s, more and more girls were gaining access to secondary education. Under the pressure of the Caledonian Union, a new political party whose members included Melanesians, the French government began to standardise schooling. The opening of Havila collège, part of the Evangelical Church’s School Alliance, in 1974 and then that of the state collège at the village of We in 1979 made the first years of secondary school accessible to girls as well as boys on Lifou without them having to move away from home. The Hnaizianu girls boarding school was first a vocational school then a collège, and both were mixed. Moreover, school attendance was made obligatory until the age of 14. It became easier to send children to collège and then to lycée in Noumea because many Lifou people were living and working there. Consequently, in the 1970s, girls began to sit for exams alongside boys.

Girls’ access to secondary school classes is one thing, their success in exams, such as the brevet (examination taken at the end of collège, before entering a lycée) then the baccalauréat (examination taken at the end of lycée), is another. At the end of the 1980s most families considered girls’ education less important because, as a rule, they would not work, or at least not in jobs calling for an advanced intellectual education. Wako Angexetine, a woman of 39, attested to this.

I left school in the fourth year. My father was okay, he was happy for me to continue but my mother, she didn’t want me to, you know, it’s the old mentality, girls mustn’t work. You must let the boys continue, the brothers…. I would have liked to continue but it’s the parents who are in charge. Before, at school, I hated sewing, but afterwards, as I’d left, I took some sewing courses. For my father it was okay, he could afford it, but for my mother it’s men who work. (Interview with 39-year-old Wako Madeleine Angexetine, a seamstress in the women’s house, 1 September 2004, Lifou.)

Although young women from Lifou had now begun to be educated with boys, in schools where the two sexes were no longer in an explicitly hierarchical structure, they were not in general encouraged to take exams. Before the 1980s, girls from Lifou wanting to take exams were confronted
with both the reluctance of their family, who saw in them above all future housewives, and the predominantly colonial nature of education.

The independence movement’s demands and schooling
In the 1980s, the independence movement became very strong and stressed the fact that getting qualifications was rather like an obstacle course for the Kanak. The structure of economic inequalities, which penalised them, and the unsuitability of the education system to the cultural realities of the country (in particular regarding language) explained this community’s low success rate. In 1985, the inequalities denounced by the independence movement were glaring:

Out of 1000 children in nursery school, only four take the baccalauréat 15 years later. Kanak represent only ten% of baccalauréat candidates, while they represent half of the generation between 15 and 20. Kanak executives can be counted on one hand: the system has only managed to produce one doctor, one judge, two teachers…. The meritocratic illusion maintained by this system conceals the true nature of this school’s role: educational methods camouflage reality, the colonial school says: “you will be rich, you will have a job”, but does not say: “you will be unemployed, that’s all you can do in your own country.” (Ecole Populaire Kanak ['Kanak Popular School'] Convention, the Embouchure tribe, Ponérihouen, 29-31 August 1985, in Pineau-Salaun 2000: 125)

At the end of the 1970s, schools based on the French metropolitan model were denounced. In 1985, the EPK (Ecoles Populaires Kanak ‘Kanak Popular Schools’) came into existence. On Lifou, there were seven EPKs in 1987, attended by 320 pupils.° Lifou was at this time the district with the most EPKs.

However, at the end of the 1980s, the EPK movement ran out of steam; on the one hand, because of a lack of financial means and, on the other hand, because certain factions of the independence movement insisted on the necessity of educating children in the French school system, in order “to prepare the future”:

International, indeed global, competition makes it necessary for us to be defended by serious and, above all, competent representatives; and competent means qualified and French qualifications are secure guarantees at these international levels. Learning the French language, apart from its advantage of opening new horizons, of giving us access to greater knowledge, to a certain notion of freedom, to an understanding of the world, is also a significant asset, if not the main one, a warrant of successful independence. (Translated extract
In 1988, the Matignon Agreements confirmed this way of thinking: in particular in the provision they made for positive discrimination in Kanak people’s education, with the “400 Executives” programme that finances the higher education of New Caledonians in order to replace the overseas recruitment of French executives. At the end of the 1980s, the decolonisation policy supported by the FLNKS (Kanak Socialist National Front of Liberation) may be stated as follows: first the Kanak must control their own economy, then independence can be true independence.

The impact of the decolonisation process on girls’ academic success (1988-2005)
In the 1980s, in light of the new policy of restoring an educational and economic balance between the territory’s different communities, parents felt that their daughters should also reach an educational level which would enable them to find paid work, the source of a regular income. Parents no longer systematically took their daughters out of collèges and some even encouraged them to persevere in their studies. Even so, family strategies concerning girls’ education were diverse: some families only encouraged sons to continue their studies; others educated their sons and daughters alike; still others favoured the children, irrespective of sex, who seemed academically gifted. My interviews indicated that in Lifou it was especially the girls who had a parent with a job, but also the eldest and high-ranking daughters, who got good results at school. Also, those whose families were in Noumea and had the advantage of family encouragement and support did well in their studies. During the 1980s, working women were pointed out as models in Lifou. In fact, most working women occupied positions which did not go against a model of female identity conceived of in terms of dispensers of care and education. Moreover, by working they earned an income which helped the couple and also sometimes the woman’s family. Finally, the people with these qualifications and who, as people often said, “were working to build the country” had a certain aura of prestige, whether they were men or women. But the essential thing for women between the ages of 35 and 45 was to be good mothers and wives, while working outside the home.

With the Matignon Agreements, attitudes towards girls’ schooling began really to change: the future of the country, driven by Kanak re-appropriation of their economic and political destiny, now depended on the success of both girls and boys at school. In the 1990s, the girls of Lifou gradually made their mark on the academic scene to such an extent that they did better than their
male counterparts in obtaining qualifications, while before they had been
doubly penalised with regard to schooling, both as women and as Kanak.
Although no study of education (Dardelin 1984, Gauthier 1993, Kohler 1985,
Kohler and Pillon 1982, Pineau-Salaün 2000) has noted this phenomenon,
the main feature of schooling in Lifou since the Matignon Agreements has
been the increase in girls’ success rates. All the teaching staff questioned
attested to young Kanak women’s strong determination to continue their
studies and find employment in Lifou or in Noumea where more than a third
of the people from Lifou live.

The figures available bear witness to girls’ success at school. I reiterate
for emphasis that from 2002 to 2005 girls in the Loyalty Islands’ lycée
made up 72.34 percent of successful baccalauréat candidates by passing
that examination at the end of senior high school. From 1962 to 1989, they
had only represented 35.5 percent of successful baccalauréat candidates in
these islands. The increase in their success rate is spectacular and indicates
a real change in people’s thinking. In 2003, 76 percent of female candidates
from the Loyalty Islands were successful in the Diplôme National du Brevet
(examination at the end of junior high school). This is equivalent to girls’
success rate in the whole of New Caledonia, irrespective of ethnic group,
while male candidates from the islands show a success rate of 65 percent.
However new constraints have appeared. With more couples living together
in de facto relationships, it is extra-marital pregnancies and the reluctance of
partners to see their companions in a higher social position than themselves
that now represent obstacles to continuing studies.

How can this women’s invasion of academic space be explained? Firstly
because, since the 1990s, parents on Lifou have strongly encouraged their
children of both sexes to succeed at school, convinced that the future of
the clan, the island and the Kanak people depends on mastering Western
knowledge. The people of Lifou are particularly known for pursuing studies
that lead to intellectual, artistic or political professions. In fact, in 2004, young
people from Lifou represented 47 percent of those in higher education courses
financed by the “400 Executives” programme, just as they represented 65
percent of successful Kanak baccalauréat candidates between 1962 and 1989
although they made up only 30 percent of the Kanak population. This earlier
success rate can be attributed to their being sought after as employees by
the colonists and the Christian schools that were early established in Loyalty
Islands. Today studying is considered a fundamental part of becoming a
person. And the prestige created by a high academic achievement is just as
accessible to women as to men.

Secondly, financial needs have increased considerably in contemporary
society and girls’ monetary contribution to everyday life, as well as to
customary exchanges, has become a by no means insignificant factor. But having an income and reaching a certain academic level also give increased access to autonomy within the marital relationship. This, among other things, is why mothers encourage their daughters to obtain qualifications. They are, in a way, an immaterial inheritance that daughters take away with them “in their bag” with their knife and their mussel shell, the symbolic objects given to girls when they marry. In the event of a long-term separation from their husband or the break up of a marriage, something which is happening more and more frequently, being able to get paid work—“to have a good job”—is all the more important for women since land rights are denied them. The land of their clan of origin, like that of the clan into which they marry, never belongs to women; they therefore are dependent on either their brothers or their husbands or their brothers-in-law if they want to live on or cultivate land in Lifou. Staying in the tribe as an unmarried sister without economic independence does not appear to be an enviable position.

THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SEXES

Since their grandmothers’ time, the gendered socialisation of young women has changed considerably in two respects. Firstly, families and, above all, mothers bring up their daughters more often to succeed academically so as to look for a job later. Secondly, the form of gendered socialisation in school space has changed. Single-sex boarding schools have gradually been replaced by mixed collèges which, on the one hand, convey the ideal of sexual equality and, on the other, hold the idea that there are natural and psychological differences between the sexes, which influences the way teachers and pupils interact and the careers guidance pupils receive.

Mixed schools

The change from single-sex to mixed schools took place gradually, and not without resistance. To begin with, it must be remembered that the first (mixed) collège opened on Lifou was the Protestant Havilla collège in 1974. In its early days, though girls and boys received the same formal education, they continued to do practical classes related to their gender, stayed together in groups of girls or boys and continued to be taught according to Christian principles. Morality lessons, prayers and church services played an important part in their education. In the 1980s, the same tasks were done increasingly by both sexes and, in the 1990s, the Christian aspect of school education decreased considerably. Thirty-five year old women talk of beginning collège as a kind of transgression. They were proud of going to school with boys, and spending more time doing the same things together rather than doing separate activities in separate spaces was experienced as something slightly
scandalous. Wallysaun Tetuanui, a teacher, described how things were at Havilla, in the mid-1980s:

We were treated alike, girls and boys. Because we did the same chores. For example, in the refectory, there was the boys’ side and the girls’ side, each group at their own table, table 1, table 2 etc…. and one day a table does the washing-up, the next the housework…. It’s not like in the family. There we don’t do the same chores and when we’re called to table, it’s the boys who are first. (Interview with Wallysaun Tetuanui, 3 September 2004, Lifou)

To generalise, task differentiation between girls and boys was reduced in school space, as was the hierarchy between them. According to Denise Kacatr, a delegate for Women’s Rights, receiving the same education creates an idea of equality not only between black and white people, but also between men and women:

When we marry, people say “women are for the home”, men are given first place. But since school, we have the same qualifications, the other ethnic groups as well. This entails new ways of being and of seeing, women can’t be confined to household work any more. (Interview with Denise Kacatr, 13 March 2003, Lifou)

This transformation of gendered socialisation is therefore seen by certain customary authorities as a perversion of custom. Meleneqatr Qenenöj, a former clan chief aged 82, expresses this in these terms:

Before, only a few girls went to school. Before, girls had their school, boys had theirs. But today they are mixed, it’s a scandal for custom!! Trevally eat together, cod eat together. If you mix them, it’s not good: they’ll eat each other. There are conflicts. But today girls ask to get married, boys too, they are in charge…. Now they mix, they have babies, there are rapes: it’s chaos! They fight like animals. Hens aren’t with cows. If you put cats with mice, it’s not good, the cat will eat the mice. That’s how it is with men and women. Normally, we only mix during customary ceremonies, where everyone has their job. Otherwise, families meet together at home…. Girls stay with their mum. (Interview with Meleneqatr Qenenöj, 7 April 2003, Lifou)

“Mixing” adolescents of both sexes was considered by some elders as a source of conflict, of disorder. It appeared, however, in my interviews that in the 1990s, although girls went to school alongside boys, the groups did not mix: girls stayed with girls and boys with boys. No married woman told me of a friendship with a boy in her collège. And outside school, gendered spaces and roles were the norm.
Since the introduction of mixed collèges on Lifou, and especially since the Matignon Agreements, most girls from Lifou have experienced two forms of gendered socialisation. The young women who lived their “youth” (from about the age of 12 until marriage) in the decade of the 1990s received a family upbringing which always made a priority of separating the sexes and establishing a hierarchy between them. But they also attended secondary schools that were an almost exact copy of the French metropolitan model. In these schools, girls and boys experienced another form of gendered socialisation. Although there was no officially expressed hierarchy between boys and girls, teachers addressed pupils of the two sexes differently, attributing different “psycho-biological” characteristics to boys and to girls (Durut-Bellat and Jarlegan 2001: 73-83). This perception of gender was found particularly in the academic advice given to pupils from year 10 onwards and when they were advised to change to vocational courses. As the guide to women’s status in New Caledonia notes, the studies and training undertaken, like the jobs occupied, by the two sexes corresponded to male and female models that were still very stereotyped, much more so than in metropolitan France.

This phenomenon is not only French or New Caledonian: it is international and is particularly visible in higher education. The staff of “Executive Future” (which finances study outside New Caledonia) observed that, although in the last few years as many girls as boys from the Loyalty Islands have embarked on higher education, the sectors remain very gender-stereotyped. C. Baudelot and R. Establet draw the following conclusion from UNESCO data on the sex ratio in higher education.

Higher education appears a very clearly polarised domain in terms of sex, including in countries where female students are more numerous than male. And there is nothing original about the model which governs this division: for women, careers in teaching and health care which continue the domestic role of protecting bodies and souls. For men, armed intervention in the material world…. It seems to be as if, faced with the progress made by girls, boys have developed quality strategies, by massively choosing technical and scientific subjects and leaving the less promising subjects in terms of wealth, prestige and power to girls. (Baudelot and Establet 2001: 117)

In fact, the New Caledonian educational system does not offer the same opportunities to girls as it does to boys. The gendered behaviour of young people has clearly changed over the last decade. All the teachers questioned reported that classes are more and more mixed (girls and boys sit together more in class) and as soon as work groups are made up of more than three pupils they too become mixed. Similarly, styles of clothing increasingly borrow
elements from the other sex. Hence the appearance of boys with plaited hair and necklaces, which the elders consider “effeminate”, while girls sport baggy shorts and singlets that are considered immodest. In many villages, volleyball matches are mixed. Some groups of friends are becoming mixed. Although girls and boys going out in separate groups remains the norm, girls nowadays ostensibly adopt boys’ behaviour: driving cars in many villages, drinking to excess. In fact, on these kinds of occasions, they claim, “We are doing the same as boys!” Jacques Eschenbrenner, a teacher, observes that formerly girls stood out in class when they were brilliant. Today some of them dare to be top of the class, not only in their marks, but also in personality, even by challenging the boys. However for the few remaining domestic chores (sweeping the class, wiping the board), boys always do the shortest and the most prestigious ones. Finally, the younger generation goes to church relatively little.

New female strategies

Thus, girls’ academic success is, in one respect, one of the strategies aimed at educating as many children as possible in order to enhance the Kanak people’s political and economic future. In another respect, this education of women falls within the framework of matrimonial strategies; girls’ incomes are considered by their clan of origin and by their husband’s clan as a substantial help in the financing of everyday life and customary exchanges.

This success can also be seen as motivated by women’s desire to gain greater autonomy. Wallysaun Tetuanui, a female teacher, explained that this kind of strategy plays a part in girls’ education.

(My mother) thought that with a qualification I wouldn’t leave for my husband’s clan with nothing. If there is a problem, you see, it’s not serious if I have a job. I think that’s why mums push their daughters: they think ‘married over there, if the husband drinks, well if she works, it guarantees she’ll be able to live okay nevertheless’. And then, if there are problems with the husband, because he’s violent, or if they don’t get on together anymore, if there’s a divorce, then the girl won’t be without anything. Because here, you know, girls don’t inherit anything and everything at the husband’s belongs to the husband. If he dies or divorces her, the woman finds herself with nothing. It’s like that, you see: during customary ceremonies, in front of everyone, grandmothers say ‘you’re going to die in your husband’s house, obey him…..’ But behind the scenes, it’s: ‘work, work, like that you won’t leave without anything. If there’s a problem, you won’t be without anything’. (Interview with Wallysaun Tetuanui, 28 September 2004, Lifou)

Being professionally qualified is therefore a means for women from Lifou to gain autonomy within the marital relationship. Having an income enables women to confront difficult marital situations but also to have more
autonomy in the choice of a husband: some women claim to have “bought” their marriage, either by helping their clan of origin financially so that it accepted the suitor or by helping their future in-laws pay for the marriage.

Because of their many forms of gendered socialisation, young women from Lifou have different ways of reasoning. According to Lahire (2001: 23): “The different modes of socialisation can just as easily form a coherent cultural and symbolic picture as partially or totally contradict each other.”

On the one hand, these young women are frequently ordered by their elders to respect “old people’s” words and customs: not to go around with boys, to do “women’s work” and to humbly themselves to their husbands. On the other hand, they live a life at school where they learn the same things as boys and aspire to a happier marital life than their elders, a dream nourished by many television series. The duty to work in the home and be submissive to a husband is more openly contested, particularly by women who are qualified or have their own income. This explains the increase in complaints filed for marital violence and in divorces (Salomon 2002). Even if at the heart of the definition of female identity there is still the expectation of childbearing and a duty to be humble to men, young women are endeavouring to gain autonomy through education. And these attempts are very often part of clan strategies.

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Finally, the gender system on Lifou appears to have been partially transformed by the evolution of gendered socialisation at school and in the family. The increase in young Lifou women’s success rate in the obtaining of qualifications cannot be understood without taking into consideration a twofold development: on the one hand, Kanak demands for access to education in order to play a real role in the political, economic and cultural life of New Caledonia; on another hand, an educational policy that is striving to bring New Caledonian schools into conformity with those of metropolitan France. This transformation is also the result of the existence of an antagonistic relationship, often at the root of social dynamics (Balandier 1971). Girls’ success at school, like their increasing economic autonomy, is changing the way they consider their own sexual identity and their duty to be submissive wives, even if the economic structures of New Caledonia continue to discriminate against both women and the Kanak. The changes in the gender system, connected with broader transformations, do not represent a break with the family, the clan and Kanak strategies. In short, the recent renegotiations of social relations between the sexes are the consequence of their contradictory gendered socialisation, of the Kanak strategies for independence and of the women’s own strategies for gaining more autonomy.
NOTES

1. I am using the vocabulary employed by Rita Astuti in her study of the Vézos of Madagascar. She retains the notion of sex as a biological fact upon which societies elaborate theories, form identities and create social relations. The totality of sexual ideologies and practices is called the “gender system” (Astuti 1998: 70).
2. Extract from an interview with Nidoisch Naisseline, a grand chief on Mare, recounting the words of Dévé Gorodé, a woman leader of the independence movement (Mounier 1997).
3. Statistics provided by the Statistics Department of the Vice-Rectorat. Unfortunately this data does not take into account the majority of young people from the islands attending lycées ‘senior high school’ in Noumea because “ethnic statistics” have been prohibited in the Territory since 1993. It should not be forgotten that these statistics had made it possible to demonstrate the economic and educational inequalities existing between the Territory’s different ethnic groups.
4. Differentiation between very young children is increasing with the use of French clothes and toys.
5. The people of Lifou distinguish between three ages in life: “children”, “adults” (after marriage) and “old” (when hair has turned grey). So middle-aged women are often called “qatre föe” (old women) and this is translated into local French as “old women” or “grandmothers”.
6. Isabelle Merle (pers. comm.) notes that in the early days of colonisation, Lifou women were valued as maids for houses in Noumea. The norm that it was men who work outside the home is certainly linked to the Native Code and to the measures aimed at ensuring a high birth rate in the Kanak population.
7. The neighbourhood schools construction programme resulted in the building of a lycée in Lifou at the end of the 1990s.
8. This impressive amount of EPKs shows once again the keen interest of Lifou people in educational matters, as EPKs rely for the most part on voluntary work (Pineau-Salaün 2000: 130). However, nobody told me about this episode, school histories were frequently limited to Protestant and Roman Catholic schools by the people I talked to, secular and EPK schools being often “forgotten”.
9. The “400 Executives” programme, which has since become “Executive Future”, is meant to promote New Caledonian access to higher education. Indeed, through this program, New Caledonians should be able to control the administration, the public functions and the economy of their own country.
10. The ban on collecting ethnic statistics in New Caledonia enforced since 1993 makes the statistical evolution of the success rate of girls from Lifou almost impossible to obtain. The quantitative data given here remains unofficial.
11. Charles Washetine (1991) notes that half the successful Kanak baccalauréat candidates in the other Provinces are girls: sexual discrimination seems therefore less strong than between 1962 and 1989 outside the Loyalty Province. He attributes this fact to a greater influence of traditional models in the islands. He puts this information into perspective, however, as the number of successful female candidates from the islands is equivalent to the sum total of candidates
(girls and boys) from the Northern Province and double that of successful Kanak baccalauréat candidates from the Southern Province.

14. According to N. C. Matthieu, some societies, like Western societies, consider the relationship between sex and gender homological: “The referent is therefore an absolute bipartition of sex, both biological and social. Maleness corresponds to masculinity, femaleness to femininity” (Matthieu 1991: 232). So it is not a question in these societies of separating the sexes at all costs, but each individual is meant to naturally feel the psychological characteristics related to his or her biological sex.

15. M. Duru-Bellat and A. Jarlegan’s studies show that in metropolitan France, schools play an active part in the construction of gendered identities (Duru-Bellat and Jarlegan 2001: 73-83). Gender stereotypes are conveyed through educational material (text books only show women and men in traditional roles) and interaction between teachers and pupils is often strongly stereotyped according to the sex of the person addressed (for example, teachers talk more to boys, particularly in scientific subjects).

16. *La condition économique et sociale des femmes de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 2000. This study shows that wage disparities between men and women are even more marked than in metropolitan France: they amount to 30 percent with equal qualifications.

REFERENCES


ABSTRACT

Kanak girls’ school success in New-Caledonia has been impressive in recent years. This article examines how the Roman Catholic, Protestant and secular schools, and the Melanesian ideal of separation of the sexes, discriminated girls until the 1990s, and how the girls’ recent success is linked to processes of decolonisation as well as to women’s strategies for gaining more autonomy.

Keywords: Kanak, gender, schooling, socialisation, decolonisation.