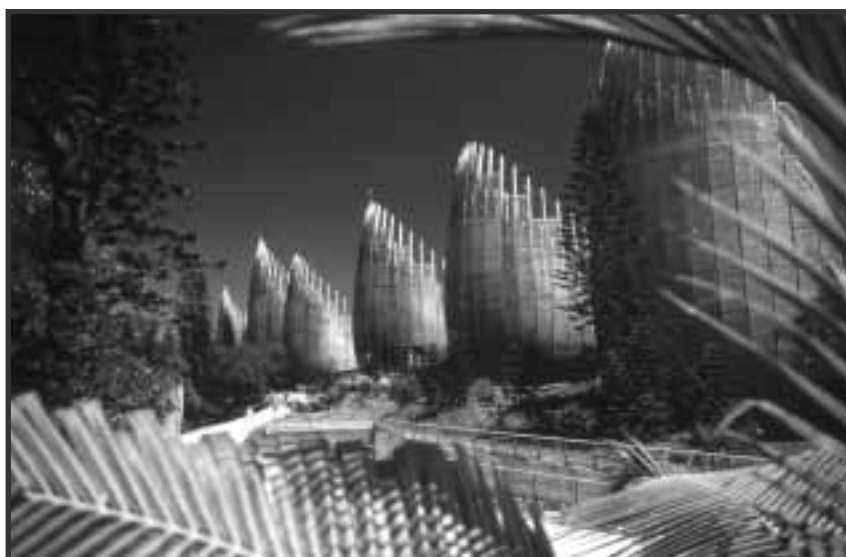


CENTRE CULTUREL TJIBAOU

A MUSEUM AND ARTS CENTRE REDEFINING NEW CALEDONIA'S CULTURAL FUTURE¹

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Centre Culturel Tjibaou Photo: P.A. Pantz, © ADCK/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

*The return to tradition is a myth... No people has ever achieved that. The search for identity, for a model: I believe it lies ahead of us... Our identity lies ahead of us.*² (Jean-Marie Tjibaou)

*...[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably... To articulate the past historically, does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.*³ (Walter Benjamin)

Most world coverage of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou (Tjibaou Cultural Centre), opened in Nouméa in 1998, has understandably featured the outstanding architectural achievements of Renzo Piano.

Indeed the forms of the complex are overwhelmingly impressive when one visits the site. However the architectural reportage scarcely discloses the magnitude of the cultural implications at stake in the way this

project was conceived and developed, or how the results are profoundly conditioned by these influences.

The subtleties of cross-cultural dialogue and imagination that have occurred in the design development of the Tjibaou Centre go way beyond formal echoes of Kanak traditional houses. Understanding this interaction does not diminish Piano's accomplishment, but particularises and enriches it. The following discussion, therefore, focuses more on the cultural context, to augment the already extensive commentaries on Piano's formal achievements.

The cultural centre in Nouméa is dedicated to the life and aspirations for Kanak culture of Jean-Marie Tjibaou.⁴ It is pertinent to consider how this remarkable man recast the terms of cultural debate in New Caledonia (and took his ideas directly into French consciousness) to appreciate the forces that conditioned the final form of the imposing Centre bearing his name.

Born in 1936 in Tiendanite, Jean-Marie Tjibaou had received a religious education initially through Jesuit mission organisations in New Caledonia (there were no public schools in his youth). He entered a small Catholic seminary at the age of thirteen; proceeded to undertake his novitiate on the Isle of Pines; and was eventually ordained as a priest of the Catholic Church when he was twenty-nine. He was later appointed to the cathedral in Nouméa, to practise his ministry there.

Three years after his ordination, Tjibaou was on his way to France for four years. Arriving in the revolutionary year of 1968, the young priest found that all the institutions of the colonial power were coming under assault at this cathartic historical moment. He studied in Lyon and Paris during this period (1968–1971), his studies being in sociology and, most importantly, anthropology. Having begun work towards a doctorate in anthropology at the Sorbonne, focusing his research on an academic study of Kanak cultural identity, Tjibaou eventually abandoned this

work to return to New Caledonia. His rupture with Western academic study also instigated reconsideration of his future with the Catholic Church. He was granted release from the priesthood in 1972.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou had therefore been close to the most sophisticated theatre of francophone debate about the future of European social institutions in the late 1960s, at a time when he was forming a deepening critique about the future of institutions in his own homeland. When he returned to Paris in later years, it was as a mature agent and articulator of some of the most important discussions of cultural equity of another kind: the equity of cultural diversity, the rights of colonised indigenous populations to regain a sense of agency in shaping their destiny.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou's life and experience enabled him to take exceptional advantage of the historical juncture confronting him. Yet it requires more than strategic opportunity to engage in events decisively, or to produce the deep impression on others and profound legacy that Tjibaou achieved. His spiritual gifts, personal resourcefulness, and vibrant sociological imagination enabled a much greater accomplishment.

Tjibaou's conceptions of culture, while deeply drawing value from traditions of Kanak history, also sought to move beyond orthodox solutions. Bringing an innovative historical consciousness to bear on fervid events in a traumatic period, he knowingly risked alienating hard-line Kanak activists. Seeking to bring to an end a period of terrible violence for Kanak people in the 1980s — referred to as the 'colonial tragedy' — Tjibaou had assented to the Matignon Accords, signed with Prime Minister M. Rocard in June 1988. The resentment of some compatriots ran deep against such a détente, and Tjibaou and a close colleague were shot by a fellow Kanak on the island of Ouvéa in May 1989 in a fundamentalist act of reprisal.

One of Jean-Marie Tjibaou's assertions, quoted at the very beginning of this essay, is

haunting in its resonance across the debates about indigeneity and the politics of cultural difference in the ensuing decades. The disarming simplicity of his statement barely holds the expanding energy of its insight: “Our identity lies ahead of us”.⁵

Among many sibling struggles of indigenous populations and minoritised cultures around the world during the last thirty years, Jean-Marie Tjibaou takes up a strategically innovative position. He shifts the foundation of his claim for recognition and renewal of Kanak culture onto new ground, beyond a direct return to tradition. This is highly unusual in comparative terms. Though more localised in its first impact, the most striking parallel in cultural imagination across the fissures of a colonised society is with Nelson Mandela (especially Mandela’s plea to retain the monuments built during the apartheid era as tools for historical rebuilding rather than simply to be torn down, as happened so precipitately across the former Soviet Union in the 1990s).

Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s conceptualisation of identity as a journey unfolding ahead of Kanak people — its mobility beyond a utopian or static past, in favour of utilising tradition to propel a people forward into a world of change — is decisive. It is pitched windward. It seeks to gain mobility from prevailing currents, navigating the ebb and flow of events in time. It is tilted towards an evolving future for Kanak culture that is constantly to be negotiated and remade. Tjibaou’s approach to identity is deeply resourced by history but also cross-cultural and reflexive in its commitment to an evolving present.

There is a clear recognition in Tjibaou’s published statements that the way back to pre-contact Kanak traditions is irretrievably ruptured by the experience of European colonisation and modernity, and the changes entailed. A direct line of unmediated access to the past is understood to be impossible. However his vision of Kanak history is not conceived solely in terms of loss. He scopes all issues concerning the future of Kanak

identity dynamically: emphasising a cultural politics-of-becoming rather than a politics-of-origins.

Pacific islanders, once assured of the conventional forms of response of their traditional cultures, which confirm them in their feeling of continuity and permanence, need new responses, suited to their new circumstances and using strong communication techniques ... We are always talking about traditional culture; but what does traditional mean? ... I think our conception of culture is too archaeological; people seem to think that authentic culture has to come from the past; on the other hand, all contemporary creativity is perceived as having to be authenticated, perhaps by time ... The existential dimension of our heritage is now emerging with today’s youth in styles of music and new formats, which do not express centuries-old life but speak of today’s suffering and joy, life as it really is today.⁶

Tjibaou’s rejection of an ‘archaeological’ conception of culture, anchored in fixed tradition and constrained by the recording modes of anthropology (as he himself had studied in France), called for new conceptions to be pursued. It was while formulating new ways forward, towards a truly post-colonial vision for New Caledonian society, that Tjibaou’s work was brought to a brutal termination.

It is against this highly inflamed background, charged by opposing views from within Kanak culture itself as to where Kanak interests lay — in a separatist return to tradition, or in a two-way engagement of both tradition and social evolution — that the forces shaping the mission and realisation of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre should be understood. The following remarks are by Alban Bensa, the anthropologist who worked most closely with Renzo Piano throughout the whole project (as noted in the *Renzo Piano Logbook*).⁷



Traditional Kanak Grand Chief's hut in foreground and one of the Centre's towers in background.

Photo: P.A. Pantz, © ADCK/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

The Centre would never have come into existence if it weren't for the events which between 1984 and 1989 propelled Kanaks onto the national and international political scene. Architecture aside, the Cultural Centre marks the memory of a struggle and of the man who came to personify it: Jean-Marie Tjibaou.⁸

The land on which the Tjibaou Cultural Centre stands today is significant as the site where the festival Melanesia 2000 occurred in 1975. This festival, bringing 15,000 Kanak people together over several days of performances, ritual exchange and celebrations, was organised through the passionate commitment of Jean-Marie Tjibaou. The Tina Peninsula site, contextualised by the proximity of land and water and great natural beauty, was donated by the Nouméa Municipal Council in 1991, and commemorated the festival's importance.

This gesture was part of an affirmative action plan by the Territorial Government, spurred by commitment and funding from France. The aim was to pursue long-range plans to ameliorate the circumstances of an aggrieved colonised people (85,000 people of the Kanak clans who trace a common line of descent from their founding culture hero, Têa Kanaké) and to develop a basis for more peaceful development across racial divides in the 200,000-total population of New Caledonia. This was perceived by French authorities as a graduated devolution, following a history of colonisation stretching back to 1853, prior to any referendum on political independence.

The decision was taken amid manifold political tensions, with direct commitment from the government of the French Republic in Paris, to create a public focus for Kanak identity. The new centre was to achieve a strong symbolic focus for Kanak cultural aspirations, close to the capital and 'White' area of the southern province of the main island of New Caledonia — whereas the



Photo: P.A. Pantz, © ADCK / Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

continuities of traditional life had been maintained further away from the southern province and main port of Nouméa, in the north and on the Loyalty Islands.

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre thus became the last of seven Grand Projects (or Major Projects) of the government of François Mitterand (along with the Louvre Pyramid and the new National Library). This final project, an astonishing monument to French political and cultural self-interpretation at the end of the twentieth century, was realised in the hemisphere opposite to France. However it is in many ways the most innovative of the projects that record the historical ambition of Mitterand's presidency. Mitterand's Tjibaou may be cast in one light as an ingenious successor to Pompidou's Beaubourg. The earlier project dramatised France's high-modernist aspirations in its capital and quickly became known to the world; the more recent project provides a focus for cultural pilgrimage in the next century, an achievement that will gain historical endorsement more slowly, but no less self-consciously.

The project, at a cost of 320 million francs, occupied a decade of governmental commitment, although construction time lasted only three years (March 1995–February 1998). The Matignon Accords first opened the way in 1988. In 1989 the Kanak Cultural Development Agency (ADCK) became a recognised administrative entity of the French Government. During the next two years an international architectural competition for the Tjibaou Cultural Centre — with one-third of the judging panel drawn from the Pacific region — was conducted. The panel of jurors shortlisted ten designs from the 175 entries listed for consideration by the Board of Governors of ADCK (chaired by Marie-Claude Tjibaou). The competition was won by Renzo Piano, of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop, in 1991.

Significantly, the project was not commanded by the Municipal Council of Nouméa, nor directly by officers of the French Government's Ministry of Culture,

the Secretary of State for Overseas Territories, or the Inter-Ministerial Major Projects Group — though all were involved at a sub-directive level. A decisive role was given to the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture, as successor to an organisation that Jean-Marie Tjibaou himself had set up almost a decade earlier, in 1982: the 'Office Culturel, Scientifique et Technique Canaque'.

The Kanak Cultural, Scientific and Technical Board, as this first body was known in English, lasted only four years before it was dissolved — through lack of support for its objectives and a political context still resistant to militant Kanak demands for self-determination. The dissolution of the first agency in 1986 (replaced by the Caledonian Agency for Cultures), and the tragic assassination of Tjibaou himself two years later, marked a time of continued colonial dominance, resistance, and thwarted aspirations for Kanak people.

The ADCK was accordingly given supervisory control of the Cultural Centre's realisation. It was decided that the Centre should carry the name of Jean-Marie Tjibaou eponymously, and this was negotiated through customary protocol. In traditional Kanak custom, names are loaned (or 'borrowed') during a lifetime, and return through a process of ritual custodianship and recycling over time; a particular name could not usually carry any proprietary association in perpetuity. However in this detail, and many other aspects of the terms through which the Tjibaou Cultural Centre was framed, tradition was to be reaffirmed but also led along new paths of development. Cultural aspirations contoured the project throughout, and contributed directly to the outstanding outcomes achieved.

The manner in which Jean-Marie Tjibaou's concepts were taken up by his widow and close associates, and subsequently embedded in the objectives and conduct of the ADCK, can be traced throughout the architectural development of the Centre. Marie-Claude Tjibaou carried forward her

husband's vision in her chairmanship of the ADCK board of governors. High Chiefs and other Kanak representatives from the three provinces, along with government officials, were also represented on the board. And an ADCK team was constituted to oversee physical articulation and cultural interpretation of Piano's designs. The Director-General of this team was a former colleague of Tjibaou, Octave Togna; and the cultural director was Emmanuel Kasarhérou — formerly the young anthropologist and Kanak director of the Territorial Museum in Nouméa.

Statements from the three individual identities just mentioned reveal the sense of convergence and strategic purpose of the project. First, Marie-Claude Tjibaou:

Before there was no one place in New Caledonia, the country of the Kanaks, containing all the available information about our society. The Territorial Museum [devoted to traditional Melanesian culture] represents the memory, while the Cultural Centre, although it is partly the memory too, is primarily our present and future mark on the landscape and the architecture. It will be a mirror for our continuous development and for the upheavals in our society and in our lives ... But the Cultural Centre is also a very suitable place for welcoming other cultures, those of the other people of this country and also the cultures of the world.⁹

The motif of 'upheavals' finely nuances and entextures this statement. It includes so much more than is normally allowed for in the rhetoric of institutional inauguration. Such rhetoric involuntarily freezes the pulsations and counter-movements through which culture is actually played out 'in our society and in our lives'. Marie-Claude Tjibaou's words acknowledge, perhaps through the tumult of her own experience, that culture moves forward through a field of contending and multiple possibilities; that it cannot be

reduced to any simple blueprint for unitary development. Her last statement, however, including 'the cultures of the world', opens up the clear cross-cultural and international address (in the first instance, regionally) which the new Centre adopted in its founding framework.

Such objectives are amplified further by the Director-General of the ADCK team, Octave Togna:

The voice of custom, politics, culture, land: we can see the consistency that ran through Jean-Marie Tjibaou's thinking. The ADCK's four objectives also reflect the two-fold dimension which always suffused his approach: roots in the past, but a concern to integrate culture into contemporary society. The heritage collection and research objectives frame the two others: cultural exchanges in the Pacific and identification of new modes of expression. Herein also lay a political will to embed Kanak culture in its regional environment, rather than in the artificial environment that Western culture represents for it.¹⁰

Emmanuel Kasarhérou, as Cultural Director of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou and himself trained in anthropology in France, was meanwhile in contact with museum colleagues in both the Pacific and in Europe. He was charged with carrying forward the museographical translation of a modern cultural centre equipped to international museum standards. His own sense of mission and purpose was clearly summarised at the time of opening, in May 1998:

The Centre's history is also imprinted with a broader vision, a reflection on the relationships that develop between a local culture moving towards various transformations and a universe in perpetual motion. The Centre asks questions about the globalisation of cultures as well as universality.¹¹

A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW TYPE OF MUSEUM

The Tjibou Cultural Centre is exceptional in the world of contemporary architecture. This is not only because Genoese designer Renzo Piano has created such an astonishing architectural complex. The centre has drawn on the rich repertoire of resources offered by a cross-cultural dialogue with Kanak traditions and history. This has included a clearly articulated Kanak aspiration to take a forceful grasp of modernity while also supporting the continuing vitality of Kanak culture as part of the evolution of a modern nation in the Pacific. The Tjibou Cultural Centre has thereby opened an indigenous society's traditions out towards the world, engaging them in a conversation with the most sophisticated resources of architectural practice internationally.

A huge distance separates the first 'museum' project of Renzo Piano's career, through which the young architect, in partnership with Richard Rogers, achieved world attention. The competition for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris was won in 1971, and the structure completed in 1977. Twenty years later, in 1991, the international architectural competition was finalised in New Caledonia to choose an architect to design a new cultural centre in Nouméa. The choice of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop brought an architect who had already worked extensively in wood, and valued its potential as both structural material and language, together with a remarkable culture of wood usage and the deployment of natural fibres of the Pacific region. The resulting dialogue between two different cultural systems, and their contrasting syntax of construction, was to bring about a renovation in the repertoire of each. The result is an extraordinary new work.

The Tjibou Cultural Centre occupies 8000 square metres and is situated on an impressive eight-hectare site approximately ten kilometres from Nouméa. The ten towering structures or 'house-forms', which

spectacularly dominate and define the complex from afar, are disposed along a 235-metre spine across the Tina Peninsula, facing the ocean side of its lagoon precinct. These imposing structures (the tallest soaring thirty-three metres, or the height of a nine-storey building) are irregularly grouped to create three 'villages'. Their layout echoes the formal, axial approach to the large conical thatched huts of traditional Kanak culture. However they are a reflection only, and in fact also radically transform tradition.

A modern complex of rectilinear buildings opens in the opposite direction from the convex towers, looking out towards the more sheltered, 'inner lagoon' side of the site. It houses refined exhibition areas, public amenities, a multimedia library and a theatre.

The relationships pursued in the Nouméa complex between Kanak building traditions and the resources of modern international architecture are subtly developed. Piano has avoided any simple divide between ordinary Kanak meanings and internationalist 'transcultural' associations. In its reach for a new kind of organic unity, the building project returns to some of the early modern and even pre-modern aspirations within architectural history. It seeks a new kind of synthesis, arousing awareness of the past, but avoiding postmodern devices of quotation.

The sail-like structures that feather skywards out of a wooded landscape on the site have a soaring lightness and curvilinear energy from afar. However they are even subtler in their layering of irregular staves and joists, louvred screens, tie-bars, curved ribs and fretwork effects at close range. As Piano explains:

I think it is important to work on the intangible elements of space. Light, transparency, vibrations, grain, colour... In order to enhance the intangible elements, I started from...lightness. The need to lighten teaches you how to work on the form of the structures, to learn the breaking strength of the pieces, to replace

stiffness with flexibility... The quest for lightness automatically brings us to something very precious, and very important in poetic language: transparency.¹²

There are also three classic Kanak high chieftain's huts erected by traditional construction methods on a ceremonial area of the site. According to tradition:

The grand-house [or Great House] is the result of collective work. The inherent decision to build the grand-house is the object of long consultations and palavers. During the consultations, each clan has to affirm its full consent to the construction project. Following the consultations, the labour is divided between all the parties. The work is thus organised not by individuals or clans, but by the collective.

The beams and posts all lean on the central post of the house, symbolising the clans closely linked to their chief. During the months (sometimes years) of the construction, the house becomes the visible sign of a joint commitment of the people and the expression of the solidarity amongst them.¹³

Each of the specially built Great Houses on a ceremonial area of the site (all surmounted by the Piano-designed towers situated along the ridge of the Tina Peninsula above) therefore represents a locus of ritual exchange and presence of Kanak tradition. Rising above these, along the brow of the land, the ten new double-roofed towers represent not only borrowing from tradition (Piano actually uses the motif of 'theft'), but also reformulation and transformation.

Two aspects of Piano's attitude in approaching this project are noteworthy by way of comparison with the dangers of cultural projection that stood in the wings of the jury's choice of any well-established western architect. First, in terms of significant metaphors, Piano avoided the cliché of trying

to engage with the 'eternal' of Kanak culture, in favour of recognising it in its dynamic outward forms — as 'ephemeral'. Instead of a presumptuous quest for 'core', he focused on studying Kanak 'materials' and 'patterns of construction'.

The spirit of the Pacific is ephemeral, and the constructions of the Kanak tradition are no exception. They are born out of the unity with nature, using the perishable materials it provides. The continuity of the village in time is not based on the duration of the individual building, but on the preservation of a topology and a pattern of construction.¹⁴

This leads directly into the second immensely propitious aspect of this project, which is the characterisation of Piano's design attitude and practice as that of a building workshop. Instead of 'architecture' in all its universalising discourses and panoply of high-cultural forms, Piano brought an enterprising approach grounded in the skills of a builder. His work has never sought the signature of a recognisable style.

Having drawn an analogy between conventional approaches to 'culture' and cuisine, Piano is explicit about what he sought not to project onto the Nouméa project: "This is exactly why I won the competition: I didn't bring my own cutlery. All I brought were my skills and those of the Building Workshop: the techniques needed to create spaces and construct buildings".¹⁵

Piano also pursued a position that discloses an important consciousness of both the challenge and limits of the cultural 'representation' attending his commission:

[I]t was not a tourist village that I had to build. I had to create a symbol: a cultural center devoted to Kanak civilization, the place that would represent them to foreigners and that would pass on their memory to their grandchildren. Nothing

could have been more loaded with symbolic expectations.¹⁶

Instead of conceptualising his method as infusing an a-temporal Kanak repertoire with the progressivist tempo of late modernity, Piano's insolent image of 'cultural theft' is a liberating one, marking a provocative inversion of terms: "From local culture we stole the dynamic elements, the tension that would serve to bind the construction to the life of the inhabitants".¹⁷

Piano has spoken explicitly of the architectural project's greatest danger — the trap of the folkloric:

The project for the Tjibaou Cultural Center...was the most reckless of my many ventures into other fields. The dread of falling into the trap of a folkloric imitation, of straying into the realm of kitsch and the picturesque, was a constant worry throughout this work. At a certain point I decided to tone down the resemblance between 'my' huts and those of local tradition, by reducing the length of the vertical elements and giving the shells a more open form; in the final version, in fact, the staves no longer meet at the top as had initially been planned. The wind tunnel [test] proved me right, showing that this produced a greater effect of dynamic ventilation... Throughout the process I received a great deal of support and understanding... The Kanaks, convinced of the project's worth, have helped me to improve it: Marie-Claude Tjibaou (Jean-Marie's widow) and Octave Togna have been tireless fellow workers.¹⁸

Two statements by the Centre's Cultural Director, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, are worth quoting in full for their revelation of the intimacy of cross-cultural dialogue that nurtured the details of 'woven facings' and Kanak-inspired 'lashings' in the final detailing of Piano's architectural language:

Woven facings

Renzo Piano felt that the material covering the facades should evoke the idea of weaving, a kind of frugality in the natural material. Using references such as basketwork, mats and fishtraps, the architects did extensive research on how to use the materials, the structures of traditional objects, the various strata which overlie each other, to create the current façade with its overlapping wooden slats. You can sense the outline of a piece of weaving work, the interwoven materials which make full and empty spaces, light and shade.

Lashings

The house designs also result from a long process of trial and error. The first attempts were not satisfactory and the ADCK representatives could not identify with them. The architects ended up by basing their design on pictures of traditional building in which bindings and structures are always visible. Similarly, the details of the structural timber and the steel can easily be seen here.¹⁹

A remarkable aspect of Piano's adaptation of traditional Kanak building idioms is the element of an 'incomplete' architecture. Emmanuel Kasarhérou again:

For the main part of the [centre]...Piano has incorporated the Kanak concept of a central avenue aligned with groups of grand case (Kanak chiefs' houses). However, Piano has translated this form, giving it a profound new expression: the circular structures of the 'grand case' soar up to thirty metres in height but they are not thatched nor are the walls fully clad. 'Reminiscent of (Kanak) houses but opening onto a dream of the future', they have a feeling of incompleteness, bringing to mind that Kanak culture itself is not static but is always open to change.²⁰

LE CHEMIN KANAK. THE KANAK PATH

A carefully planted 'indigenous landscape' surrounding the Tjibaou Centre celebrates cultural ideas that are far removed from Western landscaping. The Kanak Path commemorates the procession through rite-affirming stages of the Kanak culture hero Téâ Kanaké. At the same time it embraces a working Melanesian food garden.

Taro (female, moist, fertilising) is paired with the yam (male, dry-cropped, vine-like, and symbolising the human being), the staple food of Kanak diet and an item of ritual exchange at important ceremonies. The *Araucaria columnaris* or column pine, endemic to the Kanak landscape, is planted along the path to a Great House, and around houses, along with the coconut. These also are twinned and gendered in complementary metaphoric relationships.²¹

Choice of plants, the arrangement of mounds of earth, and the differentiation between inhabited spaces and contrasting natural features, reverberate with cultural significance. They are deployed in traditional culture according to spatially embedded reference points that correspond to regulating social structures and patterns of filiation.²²

As throughout the Pacific, traditional horticulture is seen as a very close relationship between men and plants. This almost mystical relationship expresses itself through constant comparisons between agriculture and society, the produce of agriculture and the men who form the community ... For instance, the Kanak compare the birth and growth of their clans to the different stages in yam growth, since it is a piece of the old generation yam that is buried to grow the new crop ... It plays an important part in gifts and exchange ceremonies ... Its cultivation has determined a lunar calendar from which most other social activities derive ... The respect for the yam yields endless precautions in the way

the tuber is handled, wrapped, offered and eaten. Therefore it must never be cut but broken like bread.²³

Spatially coordinated frameworks regulating traditional Kanak society before the arrival of Europeans were "disjointed by the process of colonization involving restriction to reservations and sale of land". Consequently such ruptures: "added to the difficulties faced by ... European ethnologists in trying to reconstitute the functioning of a society whose complex networks of alliances prevent its classification among the classical organizational systems of chiefdoms".²⁴

Culturally-defined relationships between agriculture and society thus comprehensively surround and mediate the Tjibaou Cultural Centre's architectural intervention in the site. The contemporary landscape setting presents an allegorical sequence of five 'micro-gardens', commemorating the five stages of the epic journey of Téâ Kanaké. Through careful planting according to Kanak references, the ritual progression along the Kanak Path socialises the architecture's strange forms and 'foreignness' — providing initiatory echoes that connect it to social history and the resonance of ancestral memory. For Piano, finally:

The tops of the three Kanak houses on the Ceremonial Area are framed by the tall, tapering buildings of the Centre. The building's strength lies in this gentle but clearly-asserted transition between the most perennial Kanak culture and the demands of the modern world for innovation ... Because we must not forget the 21st century is dawning; we may well now be able to use very advanced technologies, but we can also soften them, and use them as an efficient tool, complementing the idea of memory, rather than opposing it or being incompatible with it. We have to reconcile modernity and technology with nature and tradition.²⁵

A few final remarks on the collection and museum aspects of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, its exhibition programs and, most importantly, the conceptualisation of the role of artists in the evolving dynamics of contemporary society. Piano's own exposition of the integrated functional areas provides a tight summary from a design vantage point, as well as revealing the defined interrelationship of various objectives (locally articulated) to ensure the vitality of the Centre's future life:

The center is organized into three villages. The first is dedicated to exhibition activities. In the hut next to the entrance, a permanent [exhibition] introduces visitors to Kanak culture. The buildings devoted to the history of the community and the natural environment of the island are located further along. Not far off is a space for temporary exhibitions. This village also has a partially sunken auditorium with seats for four hundred. At the back of the auditorium is an amphitheater for open-air performances ... The second village contains the offices used by the Center's historians and researchers, curators of exhibitions, and administrative staff. The huts in front of the offices house a conference hall and a multimedia library. On the lower level, specimens of the island's traditional crops are grown on a series of terraces ... The village at the end of the path, set slightly apart from the flow of visitors, is devoted to creative activities. The huts house studios for dance, painting, sculpture, and music. On one side is a school, where children are introduced to the local art forms.²⁶

In this summary, various strands can be observed of the interpenetrating sinews of a living culture, radically reaching beyond the rejected model of a tourist village: commemoration and respect for the historical past; a comprehensive approach to the sociality of all cultural forms; learning, experience, study

and research; international outreach; education of the young; new encounters (temporary exhibitions, visiting artists); and performance and workshops for ongoing creativity and social exchange. This is an audacious and multifaceted strategy, with purpose-built facilities to support it, for any museum to be pursuing today. Few museums indeed could claim to equal this mission in its comprehensive socialisation of purpose, addressing the society (and cultural geography of a whole region) in which it is located.

In other documents produced prior to opening, the ADCK — as the governing body of the Centre's ongoing programs — elucidated a four-part mission statement of its purposes, of which the Tjibaou Cultural Centre was to be the most visible focus and physical manifestation. This is a summary of two slightly different statements:²⁷

1. Documentation, promotion and development of Kanak cultural heritage (archaeology, ethnology, linguistics...) both inside and outside the country.
2. Promotion of contemporary forms of expression of Kanak culture (creativity).
3. Study and development of cultural practices, enabling definition of a cultural policy turned towards the future, together with institutional partners (the three provinces) and cultural associations.
4. Promotion of international cultural exchanges, especially in the Pacific region.

Within the layout of functional areas of the Cultural Centre described earlier by Piano, are several spaces worth remarking upon and augmenting with Kanak descriptions.

A room closest to the entrance hall, entitled Kanaké, provides a multimedia introduction to Kanak culture and its self-placement in history. The video-film montages show images of nature, agriculture, and

ancient objects, with contemporary images of Kanak people, music, and continuing social forms. This eight-minute multimedia presentation marks the centre's strongest excursion into the high-tech language of virtuality, exceeded elsewhere by a commitment to actuality, and diversity of modes and content of experience.

Nearby, the Bwénaado House (or 'hut') is named in the Cemuhi language, one of the twenty-eight languages of New Caledonia — although the centre as a whole adopts a sampling of languages from the principal island of New Caledonia. The Bwénaado House, as explained by Cultural Director Emmanuel Kasarhérou, denotes "the customary gathering place", and is dedicated to the historical dimension of Kanak heritage. It houses major historical pieces of Kanak sculpture and implements, as part of a loan program from overseas museums to reinstall Kanak cultural items on an ongoing basis as the 'heritage collection' part of the centre's displays. There is also an implicit claim for restitution of cultural heritage behind this program, but with the novel twist of approaching the issue on a loans basis, a mechanism that can bypass current legislative restrictions of many museums.²⁸

Marie-Claude Tjibaou's words on the objects exhibited in the Bwénaado House are memorable:

Europeans go to look at objects. But Kanaks go to look at Things that their ancestors made two hundred years ago. These Things which come back after two hundred years of absence are alive for us... And aren't they also here to call out to us? 'We were here two hundred years ago, have you forgotten us?' ... Even if our Things went away long ago, they aren't lost for us: we are still bound to them. Even if they may have been bought, they belong to the country, to the Kanaks ... they represent them or bear witness to the fact that they are recognised... In spite of all that, it is a good thing for

them to be in the museums around which they are scattered: we exist through them to some extent, all over the world... I hope many young people will come and see them... They need to see how Kanaks interpret all this today, in the computer age, in the age of space travel.²⁹

A magnificent, wood-panelled room of recently created works is encountered in the Jinu House, meaning 'the spirit' in the Kanak languages of the northern part of the main island. This room, presenting commanding sculptures of the Pacific region, forms the centrepiece of the 'village of the arts' in the complex. The majority of these tall sculptures, many relating to house-form carving traditions, were formally commissioned by the Centre from neighbouring cultures. Drawn from Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Arnhem Land in northern Australia, and Maori culture in Rotorua, Aotearoa/New Zealand, most sculptures originated in the context of ceremonial ritual exchange.³⁰ This relocated the earliest acquisitions made by the Centre within a social context of continuing artistic production in the region, bypassing the open market through which such sculptures usually reach museums.

The three rooms above constitute the 'village' housing permanent exhibitions. They are disposed leftwards from the entrance hall. The towers leading to the right of the main entrance, by contrast, are devoted to the multimedia library and ongoing research functions of the Centre.

On the southern side of the main axis linking the ten dominant tower structures externally are three areas dedicated to temporary exhibitions. Some of these are quite small, and the one important question to face the Centre in the future will be how to present larger installations of contemporary art on occasions. A more generous space is required to accommodate the energies of contemporary creativity, which can only be revealed when it is possible to install a quite

large and diverse exhibition of works by different artists — or even a more intense survey of the work of a restricted number of artists. Such a space would need to provide more lineal enclosure and area (walls or variable divisions) and controlled illumination (beyond large fenestration and natural light) to present works in a variety of contemporary media.

One of the temporary exhibition areas — the largest space, divided into two rooms — is called the Bérétara Room, measuring 410 square metres. During the opening period this area housed an exhibition of works selected from a slowly growing permanent collection of some 400 works, purchased through a special fund for the acquisition of contemporary works from the region — the ‘Fonds d’art contemporain et océanien’ (FACKO). All works date from the 1990s, and are drawn from both Kanak culture and the arts of Pacific countries.³¹ The works embody continuity and innovation, tradition and adaptation, and incorporate both indigenous cultural streams and a wider Western vision of art.

Such works mark a long-term collection plan to build the largest collection of contemporary Pacific art in the region of its production — an innovative concept of specialisation, conceived to nurture a unique local constellation within the operations of art museums internationally. It is a forceful response to the forces of globalisation, while also reaching beyond parochialism. The Tjibou Cultural Centre’s mentors aimed to expand and redefine cultural identity for the future evolution of New Caledonian society. This they have accomplished innovatively and comprehensively.

My former identity was defined by the voice of custom. My identity today, however, draws richness from yesterday’s heritage but with this new dimension. The real challenge is to show that I am Kanak, but a Kanak of my time... This is also the challenge to be met in designing

the Tjibou Cultural Centre, which, to my mind, gives substance to two important things: the place where the Kanak memory will be passed on, symbolised by the multimedia library and by the classes in residence and all the artistic places, symbolic of creativity, and as such, carrying a vision of a society undergoing deep change.³²

The ambitious interplay of ideas that has gone into the Tjibou Cultural Centre complex has also yielded a striking characterisation of the emergence of ‘the artist’ in New Caledonian society. The artist is linked to new modes of social imagining and transformation. Contemporary creativity is refracted through an audacious venture of cultural redefinition. The following quotation from Octave Togna forms a fitting grace-note to a remarkable enterprise:

Developing a culture means constantly being a catalyst to show how our society is evolving. This is one of the contributions of modern society to culture. The word ‘artist’ does not exist in any of the Kanak languages, but artists are needed today. They are becoming the mirror for our society, they reflect our image and our contradictions.³³

Endnotes

- 1 This essay is a revised and abbreviated version of a much longer text, “Projects in the Redefinition of Culture”, in *Journal of Visual Arts and Culture*, no. 3, 2001.
- 2 “Our identity lies ahead of us” is one of Jean-Marie Tjibou’s most famous and consequential statements, quoted in various translated versions in English. See Tjibou Cultural Centre, English edn. (Nouméa: Tjibou Cultural Centre, Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak/ADCK, 1998), pp. 4–5. The present version of this statement is taken from a press booklet edited by ADCK Cultural Director, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, for release at the time of the Centre’s opening in May 1998 (p. 30).
3. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1940; pub.1950]; in Walter Benjamin,

- Illuminations, Hannah Arendt (ed. and intro), (New York: Schocken, 1969) p. 255.
4. For a brief account of the events of Jean-Marie Tjibaou's life, combined with an edited survey of his ideas, aspirations, cultural context and political efforts, see *Cibau Cibau*, (Nouméa: Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak, 1998). The English edition contains excerpts of texts by Tjibaou translated and republished from Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *La Présence Kanak*, Alban Bensa & Eric Wittersheim (eds), (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1996).
 5. See note 2.
 6. *Cibau Cibau*, pp. 40, 42.
 7. Renzo Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, (London: Thames & Hudson) 1997, p. 180.
 8. Quoted in a press booklet at time of the centre's opening; see note 2.
 9. Marie-Claude Tjibaou (widow of Jean-Marie Tjibaou), 'Introduction', in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 9.
 10. Octave Togna, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 29.
 11. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, Tjibaou Cultural Centre & ADCK; press material and associated documents, 1998 — see note 2.
 12. Renzo Piano, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, p. 64.
 13. Kamille Ipère, "The Grand House [The Great House]", in Octave Togna, Jacques Sarimin & Grégoire Seither (eds), *Who We Are* (Nouméa: Festival Committee [Festival of Pacific Arts] & ADCK, 1992), p. 7. Note: this booklet was produced especially for distribution by the delegation from New Caledonia at the VIth Festival of Pacific Arts, Rarotonga, the Cook Islands, in 1992.
 14. Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, p. 176.
 15. Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, p. 174.
 16. Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, p. 174.
 17. Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, p. 176.
 18. Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, p. 180.
 19. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, p. 68.
 20. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, "Men of Flesh and Blood: The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea", in *Art and Asia Pacific*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1995, p. 94.
 21. See Emmanuel Kasarhérou & Béalo Wedoye, with Roger Boulay & Claire Merleau-Ponty, *Guide to the Plants of the Kanak Path*, (Nouméa: Tjibaou Cultural Centre & ADCK, 1998).
 22. Jean-Yves ['Béalo'] Wedoye & the ORSTOM—Atlas of New Caledonia, "Alliances", in *Who We Are*, (Nouméa: Festival Committee [Festival of Pacific Arts] & ADCK, 1992), pp. 16–18.
 23. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, 'Yam', in Emmanuel Kasarhérou, *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, 20.
 24. Wedoye, "Alliances", p. 16.
 25. Piano, quoted in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, p. 66.
 26. Piano, *The Renzo Piano Logbook*, p. 178.
 27. *Who We Are* (see note 13), pp. 53–4.
 28. Kasarhérou, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 77.
 29. Marie-Claude Tjibaou, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 78.
 30. Kasarhérou, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 81.
 31. Kasarhérou, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), pp. 87–93.
 32. Octave Togna, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 31.
 33. Octave Togna, in *Tjibaou Cultural Centre*, (see note 2), p. 31.