Book Review

TRÂN Ngọc-Anh, *Taramoin. Oral Tradition and Written Tradition in Nursery School. Thio, New Caledonia, 1984-1998*, Paris: L'Harmattan, Portes Océanes series, no. 45, 2018, 211p. € 23, ISBN: 978-2-343-15367-4.

This recent book by Ngoc-Anh Trân deals with the schooling of Kanak communities on their own territory, which has been French since 1853. The systematic failure among Kanak students drove the—female—author to understand its multiple causes and offer didactic and pedagogical solutions that she implemented; the solutions were assessed by the school administration. This is a welcome book, as it deals with current issues at a time when a major political process is ongoing in New Caledonia. The author is a member of ADEB—Association for the Development of bi/multilingual education.

The 200-page highly readable book presents several documentary strata. First, the author provides a general and very accurate introduction to New Caledonia, which is necessary for readers from Mainland France. She provides a geographical presentation and location in the Pacific Ocean; a short history; settlers from other parts of the world; the first people transported from France—Louise Michel being the most famous among them—and, later, workers from Asia; economic and geopolitical issues and a big linguistic diversity on the Main Island and the three Loyalty Islands. Thereafter, we find the dual educational system consisting of "public" education, which ignores local languages and the actual set-up of Kanak students; parochial Catholic and Protestant systems; implementing a self-contained system set up in the late eighties, the EPK (Kanak Popular Schools.) Finally, based on her doctoral dissertation, the author, after analyzing the school experiments conducted in about twenty African postcolonial countries, presents a blueprint for education, taking into account the breakthroughs of the teaching of French as a teaching language, developed, among others, by CREDIF and initiated by Paul Rivenc and whose last Director was Daniel Coste. The book's enigmatic title is the result of this experiment: Taramoin (in the Xârâgurè language it means "keeping the house") is the first name of one of the schoolteachers who took part in implementing the pedagogical proposals.

Lastly, the book is based on a multi-tiered timeline, first the seventies and eighties when the author, a native Vietnamese initially a schoolteacher and later a tenured high-school English teacher, was separated from the predominantly white population, although not immersed in ancestral Kanak culture. She could also see from inside the resounding failure of an entrenched and inegalitarian system. The seventies and eighties were the years she spent on doctoral research and produced a doctoral dissertation with about 1,000 pages; she conducted surveys with schoolteachers, parents, students, and developed a novel teaching system inherent to the actual local situation. Another period was the late 1990s, when it was possible to experiment within a Catholic school located in Thio—a Main Island community with the biggest nickel mine in the world. In 2017-2018, she wrote this book that has a political value—in the primary sense of educational policy—at a time when the November 2018 referendum was upcoming. The referendum was provided for thirty years ago when a tragic conflict between communities took place in New Caledonia.

Such multiple entries and layers may lead to repetition, and sometimes make for a lack of thematic consistency, but they never hinder the understanding from inside of this French territory and the educational process.

A territory with two societies

New Caledonia is located off the major sea lanes between Australia, Japan, the United States, and French Polynesia, about 10,000 miles from Mainland France. It brings invaluable wealth to France in the form of mainly nickel ore, and 20% of the total French Exclusive Economic Zone. As a result, France has the world's second-biggest maritime domain. Just like Sakhaline for Russia and Australia for the British Empire, New Caledonia is the place where the French Empire transported and relegated a significant prison population between 1855 and 1894. This penal colonization was soon followed by worker settlement required by the discovery of nickel—Thio, in 1875, became the world's first nickel mining district. The miners were brought over from China, Vietnam, and India. Such major changes upended an ancestral lifestyle, and they led in 1917 to the first conflicts between Western governors and Melanesian populations, whom whites called "Canaques," a derogative term. In 1887, a first census showed that Melanesians represented 68% of the population. In 1901 they were down to 53.5% and in 1976 41.7%. Thus, Kanaks became a minority in their own land, and they were limited to mostly menial service jobs (women were cooks and men were workers, employees, but also often farmers.) For a long time, Melanesians did not have any civil rights and did not attend colonial schools. This situation did not change until 1946, when the Black Code was repealed and New Caledonia was turned into an Overseas Territory. Until that time, only parochial schools admitted Kanak children, since school attendance was not compulsory (only in 1945 did each tribe get running water, a school, and an infirmary.) In 1957, Kanaks were enfranchised, and the late 1980s saw the emergence of the FLNKS Party (which assumed the term Kanak,) the Matignon Accords (1988); the Nouméa Accords (1998) made it official that "Kanak languages are, along with the French language, teaching and culture languages in New Caledonia." The transfer of authority for primary school occurred in 2000, followed in 2012 by a transfer regarding high school education.

What is the actual situation of school education among the Kanak communities? In 1977, Kanaks represented only 5.8% of the 241 students who graduated from high school in New Caledonia; ten years later, the percentages were unchanged, at between 10 and 12% of the 550 graduates overall. The causes of this inevitable massive failure owing to insane pedagogical egalitarianism all over the "French" territory are the subject of a sober presentation in many places in the book. Schools teach an academic French which is alien to a population with an oral Melanesian language (to the 28 different languages, one of which has a Polynesian origin, four were added in 1992 to the official school list drawn up by the 1951 Deixonne Act: Ajië, Drehu, Nengone, and Paicï.) French, the only teaching language is, as early as nursery school, a "Native speakers' French," taught with "textbooks designed in France for French people who are steeped in the written tradition." (p. 136.) Nothing about oral-tradition Melanesian languages and cultures—so different from European languages—is taken into account. Therefore, failure starts at a very young age. The surveys performed by the author show junior high school students who have repeated classes 3, 4, or 5 times. A Kanak student "must have math problems about trains: he has never seen one before and does not understand the wording very well." (id.)

Linguistic issue and school issue

Therefore, the linguistic issue is a central one in New Caledonia, and here it shows very vividly what language teaching is all over colonial empires (and on the "fringes" of Mainland France, where in 1951 "local lingoes" were discovered in 13 out of the 26 French Education districts): a colonizer's will to assimilate, whose power is both hyper-

centralized and expansionistic. In 1921, a government order prohibited Melanesian language publications; in 1923, other regulations prohibited the use of the people's language in the Republic's schools (p. 48.) French local educational authorities kept digging in and rejecting any breakthrough, showing both scorn and ideological inflexibility until the 1980s. Thus, in 1975, a memo from the New Caledonia Education authority regarding the teaching of Melanesian languages and cultures provided "that there does not seem to be any justification for comparison with some major regional languages in Mainland France, which are mediums of literature and have […] been used as means of expression by hundreds of thousands of people. Including Melanesian vernacular languages in the high-school national examinations cannot be properly contemplated." At the same time in Mainland France, everything was done to limit, diminish, or annihilate any vague attempt to develop regional languages in education.

The author recounts in minute detail the story about the establishment of Kanak Popular Schools in March 1985, following schools such as Seaska, Diwan, Calandretas, or Bressoles in Mainland France. The Kanak Popular Schools took into account the language of the tribes based on a Freinet-type ideology, with a specific history program, close to the nationalist and anti-colonialist parties. However, the lack of training and resources, the obvious amateurism of many teachers in those 56 schools caused their failure. It is worth noting that as soon as the Kanak Popular Schools opened, some pro-independence officials knowingly decided not to send their children there (p. 95,) as they were well aware of the reasons that a few years later saw the end of this first school autonomy experiment.

The author defended in 1990 a dissertation based upon and taking strength from an analysis "from inside", which she is familiar with, as she herself is part of a group (French people of Vietnamese descent) somewhat branded by the Establishment. The dissertation is also based upon a long analysis of some school systems in countries that used to be part of the French African Empire. On such bases, the dissertation offers an educational system that departs both from the Kanak Popular Schools and the French system. The experiment was allowed only in Thio's Catholic schools, where a new didactics was implemented and made perfectly clear. It consisted of CREDIF resources re-written for the New Caledonian context and an introduction to the community's language (Xârâgurè in this instance) through oral methods by seasoned teachers. It also valued respect for oral tradition's heritage and for what a language conveys in the matter of a worldview; it included parents in the process, and then brought in the crossover to French through the "French as a Teaching Language" method. All this bore fruit as regards school inclusiveness, cognitive awakening, the development of bilingual abilities, and pleasure among students to be at school.

In no way does the author pit Melanesian languages against the French language; she stays away from a binary confrontation between rabid separatism from France and neo-colonialism. The pedagogical proposal spread over two school years, 1997 and 1998, but rejected by Education authorities at the time, "made it possible to assert that early multilingualism and early multiculturalism are possible with an oral-tradition language, French as a teaching language adapted to an oral tradition, and English in the form of nursery rhymes." Ngoc-Anh Trân's book combines pedagogical experiments and macro-structural analysis of existing systems; it sheds an interesting light and suggests serene avenues that benefit a New Caledonian system that can profit from using its diversity and complexity to heal its wounds.

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