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## Déwé Gorodé: The Paradoxes of Being a Kanak Woman Writer

### **Abstract**

During an unpublished interview in December 2002, in the smallish government office of the then Minister for Youth and Culture, in Nouméa, Déwé Gorodé told me she was merely the spokesperson for her group, elected and not appointed, called to power as Vice-President of the Government to serve her party, the PALIKA (Kanak Liberation Party). In a first and major interview by Blandine Stefanson for the volume of *Notre Librairie* devoted to a presentation of New Caledonian literature, the writer claimed she had never made any great effort to be published and still had a pile of stories in a cardboard box lying unread. Her first volume of poems, *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells*, poems written from the early seventies onwards, was published in 1985 by Edipop, and only after the then Director of Do-Neva College, Ismet Kurtovitch, made a personal request.

RAYLENE RAMSAY

## Déwé Gorodé: The Paradoxes of Being a Kanak Woman Writer

During an unpublished interview in December 2002, in the smallish government office of the then Minister for Youth and Culture, in Nouméa, Déwé Gorodé told me she was merely the spokesperson for her group, elected and not appointed, called to power as Vice-President of the Government to serve her party, the PALIKA (Kanak Liberation Party). In a first and major interview by Blandine Stefanson for the volume of *Notre Librairie* devoted to a presentation of New Caledonian literature, the writer claimed she had never made any great effort to be published and still had a pile of stories in a cardboard box lying unread. Her first volume of poems, *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells*, poems written from the early seventies onwards, was published in 1985 by Edipop, and only after the then Director of Do-Neva College, Ismet Kurtovitch, made a personal request.

Speaking in protest against women's secondary place in their own society in a programme made on Kanak women for local New Caledonian television early in the new millennium, Gorodé again played down her individual role. Paradoxically, the characters she invents, her Utê Mûrûnû (Little Coconut Flowers) in particular, are called upon to be Kaapo, strong women who refuse polygamous or arranged marriage and follow their own 'steep' path. Like Gorodé herself, they are rebellious women, direct in speech and uncompromising. Yet, like Gorodé, no Utê Mûrûnû sees herself as autonomous subject, insists on her own agency, or feels entitled to speak out other than to a small number of people. The subtitle of *Utê Mûrûnû*, 'Little Coconut Flower', is 'dialogic' in the Bakhtinian sense, rather than ironic.

This first Kanak novella (1996) re-writes grand colonial History, wars and politics, by fore-grounding instead the lives of five generations of women all named Utê Mûrûnû. As well as being a 'Kaavo', the 'Princess of Legend', adventurous daughter of the chief of oral tradition, who defies the male authority of tradition by striking out to find her own husband or to take revenge, all of these women represent traditional Kanak female values of modesty, service to others, and a certain kind of self-effacement. These female protagonists transmit knowledge of plants and women's medicine, of growing and healing, of story and indeed tradition from generation to generation. All of the five generations of Utê Mûrûnû, at once grandmother and granddaughter, are intimately connected to the point of being almost interchangeable — as the final line of the text makes explicit, '*Utê Mûrûnû*, but which one of us?'. (In Kanak tradition, every fourth

generation takes the name and place of the great great grandparent as their ‘little sister’ or ‘little brother’.) This refusal to simply adopt European style ‘feminism’ despite her denunciations of the inequality of women is the first of a nexus of paradoxes, or apparent contradictions, in the life of Gorodé and her characters.

The characteristic of the texts of this first published Kanak writer that sustains the interest of a reader, of whom much will be demanded, is, again paradoxically, both its simplicity and directness and its inaccessible ‘difference’. Such a ‘difference’ lies not simply in Déwé Gorodé’s ethnographic portraits from the inside or in her militant political themes, or indeed in the exoticism of the strange or suppressed Other she speaks for, but rather in the very paradoxes of her writing. It is an apparently contradictory ‘difference’, then, not dissimilar to the minimal difference ‘where the meanings are’ that Marguerite Duras speaks of, for example, in her autobiographical fiction, *Emily L.* or again, to the absent and therefore ‘absolute’ image at the centre of the genesis of her book, *The Lover*.

This difference is related both to the Word, a powerful concept in the Kanak world, reinforced by biblical texts in a society still profoundly marked by Protestant and Marist evangelisation, and to silence. Speaking to Stefanson of Kanak as community, and of the inclusiveness of Kanak dance, or pilou, Gorodé points out that many things in Kanak society cannot be said; ‘You can’t just say any thing to everyone’ (11). What can be said is a function of the relationship of kinship. The *pilou*, then, is a compensation.

The others don’t necessarily share verbally but they are accepted in the group as everyone is. Every person must do something of use to the group, and you don’t have the time to worry about individual problems. With the new generations, there are perhaps some women who are more preoccupied by their individual lives, but the young people are there, taking part in customary life, sharing in communal work.

(11)

For, as Pascal argued, the ‘I’ is ‘haïssable’ — the self is to be eschewed. In Kanak society, too, the ‘I’ lies outside tradition, which privileges the community. This is the second paradox of Gorodé, the individual writer, who walks a tightrope between political commitment to the group and personal work on words. Writing may reconstruct the lost and treasured memory of the group but writing as an individual, and especially critical writing, also places this Kanak woman outside her traditional community. As a consequence of this paradox, the only autobiography available for Déwé is what can be put together from interviews and public presentations, and, more indirectly, from her poems, translated in *Sharing as Custom Provides* (2004); her three volumes of collected short stories, *L’Agenda* (1994) and *Utê Mûrûnû*, (1996), (translated by Peter Brown in *The Kanak Apple Season*, [2004]) and the collaborative work with Weniko Ihage, *Le Vol de la parole* (2002); her small book of aphorisms, *Par les temps qui courent* (1996); an unpublished play, *Kénaké 2000* (2000); and *L’Epave*, her 2005 novel. This essay will follow Gorodé’s life in part through a public talk given in March



2005 at the University of Auckland to mark the launch of the bi-lingual anthology of her translated poetry, *Sharing as Custom Provides* (2004) and the single published interview by Blandine Stefanson, and in part through extracts from her work. This allows the presentation of the Kanak woman in her own words as she selects in the present the moments that have constituted her life as a Kanak woman writer and militant activist.

Like most writers' autobiographical accounts, Gorodé's self-presentation situates the origins of her vocation in a partially idealised childhood. Before she went to school, an event of some importance, she notes, her father had taught her the alphabet. Apart from being punished for speaking her own language, *Paici*, school is predominantly a happy memory:

we used to count using sticks, play marbles with bancoul nuts, we would hang our little baskets of food on the coffee bushes, we'd go swimming in the sea before we went back into class after lunch and we would also go and help work in the field that belonged to our old Wananga teacher. So I learn to read and I start to devour all the texts in our reading book, *Tales and Legends of Black Africa*. (Gorodé 2005b)

Gorodé's evident desire to pass on the lessons of her own experience, the sense of a didactic message in a very oral text marked by address to the listener/reader, is accompanied by her evident pleasure in word play. The titles of the readers she has retained from a childhood more than thirty years earlier are 'Masikasika, The Little Duck' and 'Yawatta, The Indian in his Canoe', her first school prize. Gorodé also evokes the daily morning ceremony of raising the French flag and filing into school in order by recalling the character of 'Avoranfix' ['a vos rangs fixes', the military formula for falling into line,] in the Asterix comic series.

The remembering of the colonial ceremonies of the past speaks also of course of the present socio-political contexts of the struggle for independence and the concomitant battle to give indigenous culture and history value and dignity. This present inflects the selection of past memories. There are a number of paradoxes here. The past/childhood recovered is indeed not only a function of the present but of what has happened in between. Colonial history is characterised above all by French settlement and a century and a half of exclusion of the indigenous peoples, parked in reserves, from the economic and political French mainstream.<sup>1</sup> Gorodé's narrative of her growing up must recognise the losses (and gains?) involved in evangelisation and assimilation to French norms. It must also account for both the negative and the positive effects of Kanak exclusion which helped conserve Kanak ways of living and thinking. Gorodé's self-presentation alternates between a discussion of the origins of her writing (in French) and her political activism (struggle against French hegemony).

This essay will largely concur with Mounira Chatti's conclusions that in Gorodé's work, it is not the dominant language that imposes ideas. Rather, the working out in writing of themes of heritage and revenge rehabilitates the Kanak point of view and exposes the limitations of French language. As Chatti's analysis of the short story, 'Case Closed' (*L'Agenda*) and its use of the path of heritage as a structural motif shows, Gorodé's text disavows the colonial or ethnographic point of view that presents Kanak as an object of study or curiosity. It reverses the perspective to present her culture as an object of love and a source of full being. This commitment partially resolves the apparent contradictions in her position; but there are further paradoxes and perversities that the literary text is called on to open up to the scrutiny of 'truth'.

The place where the stories begin and to which they largely return is the tribu (the clan and its lands) beside the sea at Ponérihouen (Pwârâiriwâ) on the East Coast of the *Grande-Terre*, or Main Island, named, as Gorodé explains, for its relation to the neighbouring archipelago of the Loyalty Islands. The wider context is the annexation of the land by France in 1853, the later establishment

of a penal colony, the allocation of land to settlers of European origin, and the resettlement of Kanak in ‘reserves’. The time of her story, then, is double; the time of Kanak memory (subjective, emotional, and faithful as Stephanie Vigier’s work on space-time in Gorodé points out) and the history (objective, rational, exact) of colonialism. ‘As soon as a popwaalé — a pakeha — turned up, most of the time a farmer or a gendarme — all the women would run away and hide in the coffee bushes and we kids would go running away behind them’ (Gorodé 2005b). But, adds Gorodé, the popwaalé only saw and talked with the men.

This, then, will be the story of a doubly excluded group. Nonetheless, it celebrates the roles of women and the origins of Gorodé’s later passion for story-telling.

In the evening, the women, the big sisters, mothers, aunties and grandmothers would sit around in the hut and would tell us tagadée — stories, fables or ‘fairy’ tales — around the communal fire. Sometimes, we would fall asleep before the all important last line.

*may this tale move your insides  
may it send you to sleep  
may it wake you  
that you may invent the next line*

Or they would send us to sleep with *ololo* — lullabies like (puu ka) sleep now (bua e uti ge) because he’s going to eat you up (I kau) the cow. Here the cow — the farmer’s cattle — is synonymous with the devil or bogeyman or evil giant of the old stories. (Gorodé, 2005b)

The narrative of the birth of the woman writer and of the Kanak activist are already entwined. ‘And in front, in the yard between the coconut palms, there would sometimes be long meetings, long hui between the various clan chiefs and tribal elders, mainly to settle land disputes. And a gendarme would always be there to draw up what is officially called the *procès verbal de palabre*’ (Gorodé 2005b), that is, the record of discussions and decisions.

When her mother took her daughter to Nouméa for the first time at the age of eight, Déwé asked her about the identity of the statue of Colonel Gally Passebosc, who was killed putting down the 1878 Kanak revolt. Her mother, the daughter remembers, had told her that it was a monument to Ataï, the Kanak chief who had led the revolt. In her interview with Stefanson, Gorodé had observed that the ‘old people’ had given the settlers of the valley of Ponérihouen the names of the places where they established their farms. This was a way of re-integrating the foreigner or recuperating the invader for Kanak culture. If she herself writes fiction, to ‘rehabilitate the place of the Kanak in their own history’ (17), it is also because ‘the political discourse that I myself used, colonisers/colonised, does not account for the perversity and ambiguity of the real relationship between the colonisers and the colonised in the past and in the present’ (17).

Indubitably the daughter of her resistant (and perverse!) mother, Déwé’s public mentors, however, were necessarily her grandfathers, men, since only they could be orators, delegated by the group with the authority to speak. The knowledge



embedded in their stories, Gorodé explains has the status of a very particular (non-European) history, geography, and science:

My father, Waya Gorodé, like his father before him, whose name was Philippe, and his father in law, Elaisha Nâbai, all pastors trained by the missionary ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt, together with the ethnologist Jean Guiart, was at that time busy collecting the old stories from our oral tradition and the jemaa or foundational stories, generally translated as myths — a term I categorically refute because what we are talking about is the history of our ancestors. And if they were mythical we wouldn't be here! ... The most illustrious characters of our jemaa ... are represented or situated in different geographical locations by rocks and mountains. Today, from my field, back home, I can see the one belonging to Tea Kenaké, in profile, lying on his back. He fell in battle during a war over the Caba valley from where many Kanak clans dispersed and scattered. Some ten years ago, during a panel discussion at the Literary Expo put on by the Ministry for Overseas Territories in Paris, I had this to say: 'When you popwaalé talk about the castle of Sleeping Beauty, one can truly say its mythical because no matter how hard you look, you'll never find it. Whereas in our case, every day we can see the places mentioned in our tales and founding stories'.

(Gorodé 2005b)

Elaisha Nabai also re-told the story of Tea Kenaké, the founding ancestor of the group. This was adapted in 1975 by Jean Marie Tjibaou for the play-spectacle *Kanaké* at the *Melanesia 2000* cultural festival organised by the leader of the independence party. Tjibaou's play will make *Kanaké*, virile ancestor, chief, and first-born, the central figure of an emergent Kanak nationalism.

In 2000, Gorodé herself incorporated the story in a 'dialogic' play directed by the Kanak playwright Pierre Gope and staged at the VIIIth Pacific Arts Festival, held in Nouméa. Her story is very different from Tjibaou's celebration of a return of Kanak from the misunderstandings of first encounter and the unhappy wanderings of the colonial period to a recovery of the traditional dances and a new *boenando* or sharing of the first yams, as host, with the Europeans. In one possible reading of her *Kenaké 2000*, it is the political and cultural constructions and 'sacrifice' of Jean-Marie Tjibaou himself that are deconstructed in the figure of the protagonist Tea Kanaké or T.K. Both Tjibaou's texts of unity and reconciliation within the diverse Kanak world and between Kanak and European (the 1989 signing of the Matignon Agreements) in a new *boenando* or fraternal sharing, and his construction of Kanaké as virile founding father are also indirectly interrogated.

Gorodé's polemical modern version of the founding myth resists the hero's tale and insists on the recurrence of the elements of incest and the fratricidal brothers present in the first-origin story. Her text incorporates a questioning Woman, (W) T.K's first 'love', who protests that the hero's refusal to run from assassination by his Kanak 'brother' would simply leave her to sort things out. This Antigone-like figure of defiance of authorities and resistance seeks help from a traditional Duée or Spirit (S), unusually gendered feminine in Gorodé's text. S plays a number of roles in her dialogues with the other characters and is figure of evident cultural hybridity. She is both the Kanak earth mother



interlocutor and the foil of European literary tradition in her debates with T.K. or with his assassin brother (B) on their planned actions. With W, she plays both the Nurse or confidante of classical theatre, and a very human Kanak nature spirit who is also an inner voice, playing devil's advocate in the debate on the future of Kanaky/New Caledonia.

S an island  
 W Treasure Island  
 S an isle of jade  
 W a strategic rock  
 S the isle of light  
 W a postcard  
 S lulled by the trade-winds  
 W threatened by radio-activity  
 S an island of blue mountains  
 W decapitated for their nickel ore  
 S of clear rivers  
 W polluted by the mines

(*Téa Kanaké 2000*)

Despite her play's critique of a certain kind of idealising masculine discourse, Gorodé's accounts of her life nonetheless affirms the importance of the masculine Word in Kanak tradition:

Another story our father used to tell us was a very long speech about the speaking perch or 'wood' — to a pilou or war dance rhythm — a speech he got from his father-in-law Elaisha Nabai who was a great traditional orator:

I climb up  
 on the wood (of the tree)  
 and the supporting branch  
 so that I can tell  
 the word of my fathers  
 the Bweé  
 and the grandsons of Béalo  
 who kill and throw in the oven  
 the people in the house of the Bai  
 Meedu

I have recited the beginning of this speech ('written' by my maternal grand-father) so many times that once, I had to be woken up because I had been speaking it in a dream-state like a sleep walker. Our father also used to teach us other shorter texts — called *pwara pwa* — which were more poetic and could be linked to specific historical events:

Noutou, cooing wood-pigeon  
 notou jée  
 notou nata nuru moto  
 where are you calling?  
 I'm calling to over there  
 In the direction of the German war

The notou, a symbolic bird, here represents a clan chief, who was a soldier during the two world wars. (Gorodé 2000)

These, then, are the stories rightfully transmitted within the clan or extended family group by the men, but the education Gorodé describes from her childhood is already hybrid, making it possible for her to become a new kind of orator. Paradoxically, again, this is only possible by ‘going around the non-negotiable rock of tradition’, as she argues in *Uté Mûrûnû* (21) that women must try to do, despite the difficulty.

Stories told by grandfathers and grandmothers and the stories of Tom Thumb, Red Riding Hood, Gavroche, the little hero of Victor Hugo on the revolutionary barricades, Old Testament tales, and legends from Black Africa, awaken the child’s imagination in a school where, although the old primary teacher is a cousin from the tribu, only French is allowed to be spoken. Later Gorodé will attend the school where her older sister teaches in an *Ajie* speaking area, also learning that language. At the age of thirteen, quite exceptionally, the young Kanak girl leaves her village, accompanied by her pastor grandfather, Phillipe Gorodé and her mother, to spend seven years in the *Jeanne d’Albret* boarding establishment for young Protestant girls in Nouméa and attend the prestigious Lycée La Pérouse. The remainder of her story, like that of her novella, *Uté Mûrûnû*, stages the journey of a strong, and eventually resistant, woman — a ‘Kaavo’, daughter of a chief or legendary princess.

Dewé’s first French teacher wanted her rare and gifted Kanak pupil to take Latin and Greek to enable her to enter the classical stream. The adolescent preferred to stay in the general education stream with the other Kanak. However, refusing the advice of the careers advisor to settle for a safe and ‘suitable’ career as a primary teacher, she later decided to go on to the University of Montpellier in France with the mere handful of other Kanak holders of the prestigious Baccalauréat to become a secondary school French teacher. Before her departure from Nouméa on 2nd September 1969 for France, Elaisha Nabai, her cousin, who ‘had the same name as her grandfather, the pastor and orator’ (Gorodé 2005b), invited her to a political meeting of young people with Nidoish Naisseline the son of the grand chef Naisseline from the Loyalty island of Maré, then a sociology student at the Sorbonne. Déwé was the only woman at that meeting, which was later followed by the arrest of Nidoish and subsequent riots. On the point of leaving as custom would prescribe, she was offered a chair by an old man from Maré. She stayed on, becoming a convert to the independence cause.

France was a mixed experience of exile and liberation, and a catalyst for both her writing and her activism. The young Kanak woman experienced the post 1968 euphoria and its student movements including African national liberation, the anti-Vietnam war movement and action in favour of women and minorities. She joined a newly formed Association of Kanak students and young men doing their military service, to discuss the Kanak situation. Marxist dialectics, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxembourg, Mao Ze Dong and Che Guevara became familiar names and Déwé read Seghor, Damas and Césaire alongside the French

symbolist poets, Musset, Hernani and authors like Genet. To complete her BA, the budding activist, now anxious to return to support the growing independence movement, had to pass traditional academic subjects such as Latin, medieval French, Grammar, Linguistics, and two modern foreign languages (choosing Arabic and Romanian). This was the period of her own first poems.

### Adieu

wild grass has taken over  
 the ceremonial pathway beneath the coconut palms  
 Straw and vines of the roof are rotting  
 mud walls cracked and crumbling  
*grande case* in ruins  
 Close call, almost too late  
 you are returning from afar  
 long journey  
 hundred plus years package tour  
 into the labyrinthine wandering of a youth in tatters  
 eyelids blinking at the sight of what has come and gone  
 Eyes opening to see  
 what was  
 what is  
 what will be  
 It's time to return  
 start over

(Written in Montpellier, September, 1970. In *Sous les cendres des conqués*, Gorodé 1985.)

Back in New Caledonia in 1973, Gorodé worked with the *Fouluards Rouges*, the Red Scarves group of Nidoish Naisseline, then with *Le Groupe 1878* (1878 was the year of a significant Kanak revolt against colonisation), and with young people from the main island who formed the *PALIKA*, the Kanak Liberation Party in 1976. A number of the poems of the independence militant were written from prison where she spent time twice in 1974 after a protest against the celebrations of the 24th September (the date of French annexation) and again in 1977.

Her writing continued through the years she spent as full-time teacher and later the nine years as a full-time activist. In 1975, Gorodé took part in the first conference for a nuclear-free Pacific at the University of the South Pacific in Suva (Fiji), then found herself in a delegation to the United Nations Committee for Decolonisation and at the first World Conference of Women organised by the United Nations in Mexico. In 1979, Gorodé decided to go back to her tribu and set up sections of the *PALIKA*. The Independence Party became the *FNLKS* in 1984 (The National Movement for Socialist Kanak Liberation) and organised the boycott of the elections of the 18th of November 1984 which initiated the period of the so-called 'Events' or 'Troubles' which lasted until the Matignon Agreements, signed in 1988 by Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Gorodé took part in meetings of independence movements in Paris, Algiers, in Canada and at the United Nations.

From 1985 to 1987, under the jurisdiction of the local branch of the *FNLKS*, the teacher set up an *E.P.K.* *Ecole Populaire Kanak*, the Kanak People's School

in her tribu, where, she observes, ‘we learned our language again and where the elders handed on their knowledge to us’ (Gorodé 2005b).

Gorodé’s political and militant activity in the Pacific, where it was the Melanesian countries of the Fer de Lance (the Spearhead Group) who supported the FLNKS at the Pacific Forum and Father Walter Lini’s Vanuatu and Papou-New Guinea who supported them at the United Nations, was reflected in her ‘Word of Struggle’ written from prison in 1974: the ‘linked syllables to cry out/ the misery of our peoples/Chains of phrases/formed out of their long combat/’ (Gorodé 1985). The militant writer translated poems from *Pierre Noire* (Black Stone) by the ni-Vanuatu activist, Grace Mera Molisa, into French. *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells* contains, for example, a poem on exploitation in the Pacific, written in Suva in April 1975:

NFPC

*Faces unknown yesterday  
comrades from all over Oceania  
and elsewhere  
to speak of the suffering of our people under  
the bomb  
multinationals  
spoliation  
racism  
to share  
the poverty of our peoples  
smiling and dancing on postcards only  
Aboriginal Land  
Maori Land  
Kanak land  
‘the same enemy, the same struggle’  
with all those who are oppressed  
linguistic barriers fall with the NFPC*

(*Sous les cendres des conqués*, Edipop, 1985)

After the Matignon Agreements, Gorodé returned to the teaching of French and then her own language, *Paicî*, at the College of *Do-Néva*. She is currently a new grandmother, active in politics as an elected representative of the *PALIKA* and the Vice-President of the New Caledonian coalition Government, responsible for Culture, Women’s Affairs, Citizenship and Customary Affairs; and she is among the small handful of publishing Kanak ‘writers’ — Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the poet and playwright, Pierre Gope, the pastors Wanir Walépane and Weniko Ihage, and Dany Dalmyrac.

Gorodé presented her literary writing in her talk at the University of Auckland through the interpretation of others — readers and academic critics. She paraphrases Tea Auru Mwateapoo preface to *Sous les cendres des conqués* noting that these poems are ‘the attempt to interpret the emerging new culture of a people struggling to be subject of their own history’. The editor of the 1994 and

1996 *Uté Mûrûnû* and *l'Agenda* concludes that 'it is through the characters of her stories that Gorodé transmits the perceptiveness of her reflections on women's condition.... These stories inscribe the indissoluble link between the past and the present, the need to think a fraternal future offering readers the elements to understand the foundations of present Caledonian society through the sensibility of a woman' (back cover of *L'Agenda*). In *Notre Librairie* (1998), devoted to New Caledonian literature, Marie-Ange Somdah notes that if Kanak memory is essential and non-negotiable, it is also the site of a social critique. For Gorodé herself, is a Kaapo — she who must break the rules or the imposed silences precisely to reveal what is unspeakable, what cannot be said. Gorodé also quotes Mounira Chatti at length, citing a critical article by Peter Brown on *Uté Mûrûnû*:

Modernity and tradition, women's liberation and custom, political claims and deepening modes of being, are the stakes of *Uté Mûrûnû*. Tradition and modernity come together in the fact that modernity transforms tradition into political struggle. In its interior duplications [*mises en abyme*], its anticipation, and its repetitions in another place, the text continues to echo itself, to weave past and future one into the other, and to establish its own traditions through a modern play with writing.

(Gorodé 2005b)

She repeats Hamid Mokaddem's claim that in the 1996 collection of aphorisms, *Signs of the Times (Par les temps qui courent)*, the colloquial use of language transposes the text in French into Kanak style.

These extracts selected by Gorodé herself from prefaces, articles in *Notre Librairie*, and a small pool of conference papers that constitute the critical writing on her work, once again highlight the 'paradoxes' this paper has begun to isolate. The first is the so-called 'emerging' or new written culture that is also the recovery of a very old oral culture, destroyed by colonisation, '*grande case en ruines*'/ great house in ruins, in 'Adieu', in *Sous les cendres des conquies*, but upon whose ashes new life has been breathed. ('Grandfather's house is undoubtedly one of the most vivid memories I have retained of my childhood' ['La Case'/The House in *L'Agenda* 7–9]). Other paradoxes include; the focus on women's condition and female sexuality that is subversive but is not a clear feminist message; the hymn to an emotionally-rich and non-negotiable custom that is nonetheless critiqued and must be re-negotiated by women; and the past that is a future although the future also calls for a new order that is a 'writing together'. The hybridity involved in this writing together is first and foremost a parti-pris of, or positioning close to, Kanak perspectives. Only subsequently does Gorodé acknowledge the need to create a mixed future from both tradition and modernity. 'Writing together' will produce a ludic modern text in French that is also said to be 'de-territorialising' French, writing over French with the traditional structures of Païci.

Gorodé's own texts present the themes and contradictions of her writing more simply still. Their recurring features, their transformations, and their dialogic relationships one with another, articulate her responses to paradox.

A series of verbs of dislocation and destruction — ‘mutilated,’ ‘scattered,’ ‘in pieces’ — are woven through poems that speak of the material and cultural destruction wrought on the land and the indigenous people by a hundred years of French dominance. Metaphors of bodily harm or physical destruction evoke the scars left on the land by nickel mining, and the reification or commodification of New Caledonian society, first by capitalism and then by its later manifestations in capitalism’s postulated ‘third stage’ globalisation.

‘Day after Day’ responds to this loss and damage by arguing for the recovery of the Kanak Word and the political role of art:

#### Day after Day

We will try to  
 glue back together the broken pieces of our dashed hopes  
 reform the slaughtered images of our strangled speech  
 rediscover the unity of the scattered word  
 thrown to the four winds of solitude by  
 the gunpowder of violence  
 the poison bottle  
 the bread smelling of small change  
 the customary gesture by the false brother betrayed  
 day after day  
 second after second  
 like the river hollowing out its bed  
 the ant counting her dead  
 the foam marking the shore  
 recreate the ritual phrase that unmasks treachery  
 reinvent the magical dance that ensures victory

(Perlou, February 1975. Translated from *Sous les cendres des conques* in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 14.)

In exile, uprooted, Kanak culture must re-find its roots not in the virile universe of heroism and warfare, as in Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s *Kanaké*, but in women’s world of the everyday. Writing translates Gorodé’s deep emotional attachments first to her Kanak roots in the earth and in the deeply symbolic force of a living nature and then beyond that, to the Other.

#### Roots

Roots stretching  
 out  
 into the day  
 by day  
 into time passing  
 into wind sun rain passing  
 hollowing out  
 earth  
 under stone  
 further deeper  
 always ever further deeper  
 to tie

the knot  
 umbilical cord  
 returned to earth  
 on earth's very belly  
 like the chrysalis casing  
 of cicada  
 returned to earth  
 on earth's very belly  
 emerging there  
 to land on these very roots  
 to be born to the world  
 before taking flight  
 bending into the wind  
 in flight toward a river ford  
 or toward waters flowing to the sea  
 and beyond  
 toward a country...  
 some foreign quay...  
 railway station...  
 airport...  
 airwaves...  
 a way  
 a road  
 a path  
 toward the other.

(From *Dire le vrai/To Tell the Truth*, also translated in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 52)

Writing asserts her Kanak identity as *Aboro*, also a universal identity, 'the human being in all that he is'.

Being  
 being human  
 in the face of two centuries  
 of colonial history  
 when  
 we were without being  
 when  
 we were not  
 were naught  
 we  
 have always known  
 that we were  
 we  
 have always known  
 who we were  
 what it is we're fighting for  
 In my language  
 Aboro  
 is  
 the human being in all he is



in all that this being  
is

(Translated from *Dire le vrai/To Tell the Truth*, also translated in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 72).

Once contact has been made with one's own people and culture, the new writing can reach out to the Other at the door and across the land to the Other beyond. ('In the footsteps/of my mother/towards the land/... with the other/who is knocking at your door...' [Translated from *Dire le Vrai* as 'Being with the Other,' in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 90–91]).

During a shared tour of Australian Universities in July 1997, Déwé Gorodé and Nicolas Kurtovitch, a New Caledonian of European origin, each decided to write a daily poem on a selected theme. These eighteen poems, among them, 'Indépendance', were translated in *Dire le vrai/ To Tell the Truth* (1998) in the first major literary collaboration between the Kanak and European communities of writers. A number were retranslated in *Sharing as Custom Provides*.

### Independence

is  
a bit of garden  
bit of field  
a patch of dirt  
patch of land  
land to work  
like the woman  
tending her children  
her taro  
her yam  
day in day out  
fishing night  
or day both  
lagoon fish  
mangrove crab  
whether to feed the extended family  
or for market day  
whether working at her own pace  
or at the set hour  
in her rights and responsibilities  
for the child to come  
or the child at school  
sharing as custom prescribes  
giving to others  
fighting her own desires  
in the face of silence  
of violence  
of inaction  
of apathy  
and state dependence  
in the face of the single way of thinking

doing  
 speaking  
 living  
 in the everyday  
 our aspirations  
 of being  
 together  
 a free country  
 a sovereign nation  
 a people who share

(Sydney, 19 July 1997. Translated from *Dire le vrai* in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 68–69)

Writing may reconstruct a group memory but writing as an individual also places this Kanak woman outside her traditional community. Where stories reconstituting Kanak Man are acceptable, those critical of custom or pushing for woman's rights might be understood to be destroying the group's mana or attributing blame too directly. It is the case that Gorodé's texts allow much of the 'blame' to be laid on the colonial system or at the feet of 'Madame Multinationale' rather than on individuals (settlers), or they present problems as a consequence of capitalist modernity. In the short story, 'The Kanak Apple Season', translated from *Utê Mârûnû* in the eponymous collection, *Sharing as Custom Provides* (72–83), Stephanie Vigier (2004) points out that it is the fiancée from the 'lands of red earth' — that is, the lands of nickel mining — who brings with her the jealousy, the boucan, the magic packet of spells and the malevolent accomplices that cause her sister-in-law to be accused falsely of sorcery and to waste away, much as the Kanak apples once celebrated customary marriage rot on the ground.

A work that affirms the singularity of her Kanak identity and perspective thus also dares to raise a critical voice, 'speaking truth' against abuses of power in a rapidly transforming Kanak society. Her texts target, in particular, the misuse of custom for personal gain, or the abuse of special powers, turned from healing and divination to malevolent sorcery (boucan or magic herb parcels), often in the hands of charlatans. In particular, they denounce the negative consequences — incest, rape and violence against women and children — that result from gender inequalities.

Fear at each bellowed liquor soaked tapers:’ [temperance hymns]  
 Anxious terror of beatings, blows sometimes fatal  
 Cooking pots thrown around under the coffee bushes [...]  
 Tomorrow, again  
 as if nothing were amiss  
 at the meeting  
 in front of everyone  
 he will speak of oppression, of freedom  
 whose freedom, whose oppression, who by who with who for..?  
 so many questions  
 our collective politics’ will have to answer to.

(‘Questions’ in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 38).

Or in Gorodé's satirical collection of aphorisms published as *Par les temps qui courent*.

It's a Sign of the Times  
 the black briefcase  
     absent  
       from the times of struggle  
 now well and truly  
     present  
 and in a front row seat  
     if you please  
 looking out for number one  
     first in line  
 in the post office queue  
     for a top job to fill  
 number one in line  
     for a position in power

(Translated as 'Sign of the Times' in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 122)

Boucan (Magic spells)  
 when you hold us in your spell  
 the brother hits his sister  
 the nephew kills his uncle  
 the daughter spits in her mother's face  
 Boucan (Magic Spells)  
 when you hold us in your spell  
 its just  
 a dog's life

(Translated as 'Boucan/Magic Spells', from *Par les temps qui courent/ Signs of the Times*, in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 130)

As early as 'Love and other catastrophes' in *Par les temps qui courent*, 1996, Gorodé had touched on issues raised by women's lives.

From desire to pleasure  
 the desiring body blooms  
 and desire  
 reduces love to pleasure  
 Rape  
 Of  
 Womanhood  
 To prove  
 One's  
 Manhood.

(Translated in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 134).

*Utê Mûrûnû* is the most direct of a number of texts that respond to oppression by valuing women, identifying them with the earth at the centre of the kanak universe, while simultaneously critiquing their abuse or lack of rights:

These voices of the earth, as my grandmother Utê Mûrûnû taught me, were none other than the voices of a mother, the voices of woman. And they spoke, especially, to us women, who, better than anyone, were able to understand them. Bearers of seed, we were bound and gagged by prohibitions, branded with taboos that were like rocks blocking the paths of life. From receptacles of pleasure, we became Eves bitten by the serpent invented by the priests of the new religion. Adi, black pearls of customary marriage, we were exchanged like pieces of Lapita pottery to seal an alliance, in between two wars. Matrimonial pathways linking the clans, we survived as best we could a childhood and an entry into adolescence that was too often violated by the lecherous desires of old men. Prestige, virility, war — male concepts for the grand case of men, built on the broad backs of women! Sharing, solidarity, humility, the word of women, conceived, nourished, and carried in our entrails of beaten wives.

(*Utê Mûrûnû*, 20–21).

In her most recent poems, as yet unpublished in French and translated into English in a separate section of *Sharing as Custom Provides*, the drift from the tribu to urban life in Nouméa is portrayed as destroying Kanak life and being, and contributing to abuse: ‘It’s a tropical town/with all the iron and concrete it takes/and a few coconut palms/to ensure that it is so/ ... we’re in France here/ twenty thousand ks away’ (Translated as ‘Tropical Town’, from an unpublished text communicated orally by Gorodé in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 146–47).

I am cut off/from my brothers of yesterday  
shattered in a thousand pieces [...]  
[in] this endless  
mental prison/before the TV screen  
that bashes my head in with  
its loin-like  
truncheon thrust  
that blows my brain  
with its global and virtual  
in total denial of my reality  
my everyday reality

(Translated as ‘Waste Land’ from an unpublished text communicated by Gorodé in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 142–43)

little boy will grow up  
into big boy  
will surf the net  
from adventure to adventure [...]  
on the computer screen [...]

(Translated as ‘Netted’ from an unpublished text communicated orally by Gorodé in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 156)

Migration to the European city can be the catalyst of abuse and moral disintegration.

[...]  
children to feed  
going to school

through the mangrove  
 while the hurrying father  
 slides a groping hand  
 towards the daughter's thigh  
 on the floor of the shanty  
 knocked out with booze and dope  
 to forget her  
 prostitute state of  
 paternal rape

(Translated as 'With back bowed' from an unpublished text communicated orally by Gorodé in *Sharing as Custom Provides*, 148–49)

But despite her critique of modernity and the City, Nouméa is increasingly a setting where Kanak have their place. The city may, in fact, constitute a place of freedom for women from the constraints of Custom, a refuge from customary marriage and difficult mothers-in-law.

In an unpublished article on representations of women in the Pacific, Sylvie André argues that many of the themes defined by theory as feminist are absent from Gorodé's work, concluding that this Kanak woman's writing is as much about a project of society in general as it is about 'women's condition'. But far from disavowing her critique of women's condition, Gorodé's recent first novel *Wrecks/L'Epave* is a story of the recall of childhood incest, the apparently 'consenting' rape of a barely pubescent girl by an 'uncle' and a 'cousin'. This abuse, begins not in the City, but on the ancestral rock near the tribu and appears to recur across generations, across time and space. Sublimated, it provokes an unconscious sexual dependency that will inflect the young girl's development and her adult relationships. Léna's memory of early experiences on the rock of the pirogues ancestors in her tribu, the complicity of a sorceress grandmother, accomplice and lover of the omnipresent Old Tom — sometimes an ancestor from the past or from dream, and sometimes a living person — is suppressed until the end of the novel. It is only when she becomes fully conscious of the nature of her enslavement that she makes a decision to liberate herself, and seeks revenge, allowing her orator uncle to fall from the cliff to his death in the shark hole.<sup>2</sup>

The rape and murder of the story-teller, Lila, which opens and frames the story of Léna's sexual dependency, Gorodé explained to me as her translator, corresponds to the real-life story of the marginalised Marie-Paule to whom the novel is dedicated and whose murderers are presently on trial in Nouméa. A fiercely worded passage in Gorodé's text explicitly denounces the prevalence of such violence against women.

Gorodé's investigation of women's own complicity in a 'sexual slavery' that is, ambiguously, either an effect of dependency on sexual pleasure, or, an effect of what, in the West, has been called battered women's syndrome, makes this novel an astonishing speaking-out on taboo subjects, including female sexuality and 'the paradise of women' or lesbian relations.

Staging similar cases of sexual control over young women by older experienced adventurers in European society, and the comic antics of a masochist employer seeking bondage and punishment from her Kanak employees, Léna, and Maria, Gorodé attenuates her criticism of women's abuse and difficult road to autonomy within the tribu by representing abuse as a problem shared by both Caledonian societies. *The Wreck/ L'Epave*, is nonetheless a paradoxical text, written simultaneously from inside Kanak culture where the role of non-rational forces such as sorcery and shape-shifting, or the power of dream as prophecy, or vengeful return from generation to generation, remain ambiguous, and stand critically outside. It is troubling both in its ambiguous writing of erotic violence and in its speaking of a unspeakable side of an otherwise celebrated life within custom.

At the end of Gorodé's much less problematic book of short fables, *Le Vol de la parole* (written collaboratively with Weniko Ihage), the flying fox (indigenous to New Caledonia) takes the migratory bird to task for settling down without first making the necessary customary gesture ('la coutume') of the guest to the host on whose land he is settling. The final message of this book, most probably a text by the pastor Ihage, which asserts the status of Kanak as first occupants of the land and the need for humility on the part of the immigrants from France, is conciliatory, and appears to prescribe modes of being together. The title, however, is again paradoxical and its message ambiguous. The use of the French language constitutes both 'theft' (vol) and 'flight' (vol) of the Word. As in the short story, 'J'use du temps,' / 'I wea(the)r Time' (*L'Agenda*, 65–70), a Kanak construction of time and space can 'de-territorialise', or use and abuse the French verb system, weaving time and tense, wearing away linear chronology to show 'the path of our country... the long path of our heritage' (2004a 154).

Written in quite standard French apart from its occasionally non-standard use of tenses, and observing many of the mainstream conventions of European literary narrative, plot, character, development in time and space, and verisimilitude, Gorodé's literary writing creates new textual spaces and places, often from the perspectives of a woman's life, that are not those of European tradition or history. The language, the tools, are French but the reference is no longer European New Caledonia. The paradoxes of being a Kanak woman writer and political leader, of being Kanak and 'being with the Other,' and of recovering/creating Kanak identity and places of memory in French, are the wellsprings of a complex and different Kanak work. The political stakes of the kinds of 'hybridity' this work engenders, and indeed the stakes for the future place of Kanak women, are high.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Code de l'Indigénat was finally abolished in 1946 after the War.

<sup>2</sup> It took an insistent offer to transcribe this novel and our project of translating it into English to extract the handwritten notebook from the box where it had ended up. Mme

Gorodé's own claim that once her texts have been given to an editor, they are simply of no further interest to her, that she has more urgent political work to do, may well be a form of self-protection.

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