

The Anthropology of Violence in the Colonial Context Benoît TREPIED

Reviewed: Michel Naepels, *Conjurer la guerre. Violence et pouvoir à Houaïlou (Nouvelle-Calédonie)*, [Conjuring War. Violence and Power in Houaïlou (New Caledonia)], Paris, éditions de l'EHESS, 2013, 288 p., 23 euros.

How can we produce a history of power and violence in the colonial context that is not confined to the discourse of the State, but takes full measure of the historicity of ethnographic and archival sources? Michel Naepels answers this question on the basis of extensive research in New Caledonia.

Michel Naepels' latest book is not only an essential work in the field of New Caledonia studies; it is also, and above all, the culmination of the masterful anthropology of power and violence in colonial and post-colonial contexts he has been conducting for the last twenty years, as well as a concrete proposal for the renewal of writing in the social sciences, from a resolutely pragmatic perspective. In line with his earlier work on the encounter between anthropology and history¹, Michel Naepels' fascinating new book is anchored in a particular place, Houaïlou – a small rural town in New Caledonia, which emerges, in the course of our reading, both as a Kanak and Oceanian social space, and as the product of European imperialism and French colonialism.

World-Systems and (Post) Colonial Governmentality

If this book – of the same “caliber” as recent works by Romain Bertrand or Frederick Cooper – is bound to become a major reference in the new historiography of imperial encounters, this is primarily because it is the outcome of the extremely meticulous investigative work Naepels has undertaken in the field, as well as in archives and museums, since 1991- a work whose breadth and precision command respect. It is also because it manages to meet the challenge of a micro-political analysis that never retreats into the totalizing aporias of classic monographs, or into the exemplification of otherwise well-known global processes. Using Houaïlou as an example, Michel Naepels develops “descriptions of particular social scenes” which “allow [him] to analyze the intertwining of several contexts in a given situation, to provide an account of various rhythms, and to show how a specific place is transformed by the flows that traverse it” (p. 15). Without ever losing sight of local conflicts, particular individuals (identified by their name and genealogically located), and “ordinary or marginal events” (p. 257), the author manages to capture the way in which much larger dynamics are at play in Houaïlou.

Naepels starts by describing the production of a global space that emerged in the themed-19th century at the intersection of two shifting and unstable “world-systems” – the Pacific and Europe – and would eventually take the name of “Houaïlou” (Chapter 1). He then discusses methods,

¹ See *Ethnographie, pragmatique, histoire* (publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), a book conceived explicitly as a presentation of the theoretical approach used in *Conjurer la guerre*.

stakes, and tensions in the deployment of colonial domination in Houaïlou – with repressive techniques and representations of indigenous society directly related to the French experience in Algeria – from two entry points. First; the multiple social use of propitiatory “war stones” from the second half of the 19th century to the interwar period (wars, conversion to Christianity, and ethnographic and museographic data collection, Chapter 2). And second, the trajectories of administrative leaders in an increasingly oppressive and complex colonial order (military and health initiatives, lineage rivalry, diverse configurations of power between chiefs, policemen, missionaries, and settlers) in Chapter 3.

The question of the way out of colonialism is discussed in the second half of the book. Chapter 4 puts the Kanaks’ accession to citizenship in 1946 in the context of an overall attempt to build new local social relations after the abolition of the regime of *indigénat*, as shown by the intense collective initiatives carried out everywhere in Houaïlou by the same people: partisan activism, the creation of an agricultural cooperative, the reinforcement of the “councils of elders” to the detriment of chiefs, witch hunts, educational and religious commitment, and so on. Finally, the last two chapters look at the process of production and suppression of violence that accompanied the gradual emergence of a “new postcolonial governmentality” in Houaïlou (p. 235), which led to the reorganization of the local socio-political field, and has been weighing on minds and bodies since the 1980s. Chapter 5 analyzes the political and individual emotions that were invested in violent action at the time of the “events” of 1984-1988 and during the segmentary conflicts that resulted from land reform. As for Chapter 6, it examines the formation of groups and political organizations in the context of decolonization and the Nouméa Accord of 1998 – traditional ceremonies, political parties, clan wars, “customary cadastre”, the gathering of cultural heritage – which all rely on the discursive register of “custom” to either control or incite violence: in other words, to “conjure up – or away – the war”, as expressed by the central ambiguity of the book’s title.

Investigating and Writing

A well-known anthropologist, Michel Naepels is also a historian in his own right, given the quality of his archival research – which is as sophisticated and detailed as his ethnographic fieldwork – and his handling of internal and external criticism of sources. So much so that his book looks like a brilliant plea for the epistemological unity of the social sciences². In any case, this meticulous analysis (or “micrology”, p. 15) aims at being of interest to historians, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists alike, not only because of its spatial and temporal scope, but also because of its Foucauldian ambition to scrutinize power through the lens of the practical logic of action and subjectivation processes – even in its “most minute mechanisms” (p. 11) – and not just in the State’s official discourse.

Each of these six chapters can therefore be read as the contextualized study of a key document, whose intelligibility requires the inclusion of other material, as well as various temporalities and scales of analysis. Thus, some excerpts from interviews on ancient wars (Chapter 1) or on recent clashes, carried out in the context of customary and land claims between 1990 and 2000 (Chapters 5 and 6) become more meaningful. So does the text called “Jopaipi”, written in 1918

² In the footsteps of Jean Bazin (*Des Clous dans la Joconde. L’anthropologie autrement*, Toulouse, Anacharsis, 2008) or Jean-Claude Passeron (*Le Raisonnement sociologique. L’espace non-poppérien du raisonnement naturel*, Paris, Nathan, 1991).

by Kanak pastor Bwêyöuu Ērijyï on the occasion of his interaction with missionary Maurice Leenhardt, and which has become a classic of Oceanian anthropology (Chapter 2). The same can be said of the personal notebooks of the “great leader” Mèèjâ Nèjâ, the *Registre des tribus et des chefs* [Register of Tribes and Chiefs] published by the Service des affaires indigènes [Service for Indigenous Affairs] (Chapter 3), or the list of people accused of witchcraft in Houaïlou given to the ethnologist Jean Guiart in 1955 (Chapter 4).

Beyond the “raw” presentation of these documents, and in order to understand as precisely as possible what they tell us about past and present social reality, Naepels turns to many sources – which were also the tools of colonial control or manifestations of Kanak political autonomy – whose historical path he retraces both in space and in time: ships’ logbooks, administrative documents, missionary writings, maps and photographs, ethnological publications, Kanak objects found in European museums, genealogical tables, stories collected and events observed during ethnographic inquiry, and so on. With a constant attention to detail, he compares documents, crosschecks dates, considers the succession of generations, and matches up names and surnames – a work for which his proficiency in ajië, the Houaïlou language, is crucial.

In the very process of writing, Naepels therefore establishes a systematic principle of presentation, contextualization, and criticism of the documents he analyses. He keeps asking “the question of what the sources can tell us about social relationships, the ways in which reality may be projected (onto written documents or observed interactions(, which the empirical, ethnographic and historiographical inquiry provides access to” (p. 260). This narrative device allows the reader to follow step by step, and with clarity and transparency, the way in which the author gradually develops his interpretative hypotheses, from the most probable to the most speculative. This continuous effort to explain the conditions in which his analysis was produced is not only a guarantee of scientific rigor; it is also a great incentive for reading the book..

New Insights

Many other groundbreaking aspects of this book deserve further comment, including the empirical demonstration that the Kanaks have modeled and used colonial devices for their own purposes as much as colonization has categorized and subordinated them. We can also think of the well-established link between certain forms of political government and processes of subjectivation of the body and affects, which allow us to consider violence in terms of a continuum, ranging from intimate emotions to colonial wars by way of the full range of family and domestic violence. Finally, we should emphasize the decisive impact of the knowledge produced through the historicization of certain canonical objects of anthropological study (customs, ceremonies, chiefdoms, councils of elders, cannibalism, witchcraft, propitiatory objects) at a time when the issue of “customary law” is hotly debated in New Caledonia.

Of course, some aspects of the social and political reality in Houaïlou could have been further explored to provide a more “complete picture”: the network of relationships between settlers and Kanaks, for instance (neighborhood relations, work, marriage alliances, emotional intimacy, and so on), internal divisions in the social world of settlers, or the reference to educational, professional, and economic capital to redefine local power relations. But aside from the fact that such a research program would require additional years of investigation, it might create the

illusion of monographic completeness – whereas, as Naepels notes at the end of his introduction (p. 16), “there are many different ways to tell this story”.

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