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Winning and Losing?

Reflections on the War of 1878–79 in New Caledonia

BRONWEN DOUGLAS

MELANESIAN FIGHTING IN NEW CALEDONIA WAS PERVADED BY VALUES OF RECIPROCITY, equivalence and restraint; in colonial contexts, fighting included, Melanesians acted in creative and meaningful ways which often contradicted European assumptions of external imposition and reflex reaction; and both contemporary texts and histories tend to anticipate the colonial 'conquest' of New Caledonia, overstate French military advantage, underestimate the significance of Melanesian agency and generally denigrate Melanesian performance.¹ Doubt properly arises about the appropriateness of the categorical antitheses 'winning'/'losing', typical of outcome-oriented military histories: 'the "outcome" approach to military history, like the time-honoured but outmoded "causes and results" approach to general history', commented John Keegan, 'pre-judges the terms in which the narrative can be cast'.²

In written histories, whatever their political complexion, there is no doubt about the 'outcome' of the war of 1878–79 in New Caledonia: 'the French' won; 'the Melanesians' lost.³ Only the moral import of the agreed result varies: 'the French' tended and tend to conceive it as the just and inevitable victory of civilisation over savagery; modern Kanak and their sympathisers see it as nationalist martyrdom in an unequal encounter with rampant white imperialism.⁴ Neither stereotype is mindful of grey areas and ambiguities, which belie a priori categories and ethnocentric or interested terminology. With particular reference to

¹ Bronwen Douglas, 'Conflict and alliance in a colonial context: case studies in New Caledonia, 1853–1870', *Journal of Pacific History*, 15 (1980), 21–51; "'Almost constantly at war"? An ethnographic perspective on fighting in New Caledonia', *Journal of Pacific History*, 25 (1990), 22–46; 'Doing ethnographic history: the case of fighting in New Caledonia', in James Carrier (ed.), *Reconsidering Anthropology in Melanesia* (Berkeley at press).

² John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London 1976), 47.

³ I use 'Melanesian' as a general label for the indigenous inhabitants of New Caledonia, 'Kanak' to refer specifically to those who took up arms against the French in 1878–79 and 'allies' for those who fought on the same side as (though not necessarily 'with') the French. This permits a positive differentiation between categories of Melanesian action without using Europeans as a reference point (cf. 'anti-French' and 'pro-French'), though it also accords with the contemporary European distinction between their enemies, whom they called *canaques/canacks/kanaks*, and their allies, whom they called 'friendly natives'. The usage is also in keeping with the ironic appropriation of the term 'Kanak' by the modern independence movement for purposes of self-reference and identification and as index of commitment. 'Kanak' is invariable in gender and number. The term 'New Caledonia' refers to the main island and the small islands within its fringing reef. I have translated all French quotations into English.

⁴ E.g., Olry to Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies (hereinafter Min.), 6 July 1878, Paris, Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer, série Nouvelle-Calédonie (hereinafter ANOM), Carton 43; Apollinaire Anova-Ataba, 'L'insurrection des Néo-Calédoniens en 1878 et la personnalité du grand chef Atai', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 25 (1969), 218; Rosélène Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale, terre d'exil* (Paris 1976), 23.

the Ouraïl theatre of the war,⁵ then: how apt are absolute, ultimate categories to the contemporaneous intentions, actions and experience of protagonists? to contingencies of time and place? to the singularity of particular campaigns? Who were 'winners' and 'losers', when, how? What did 'winning/losing' comprise in military, rather than post-war socio-political terms?⁶

THERE were three major colonial wars in New Caledonia in the 19th century: in 1856–59 in the south, 1868–69 in the north and 1878–79 in the west. The last was by far the largest, in numbers involved, extent and intensity, but its onset stunned a complacent European populace, apart from a few who experienced some forebodings.⁷ For much of the 1870s metropolitan parsimony had forced the colonial Administration in Noumea virtually to abandon permanent occupation of the area north of Bouraïl and Canala and rely on tours of inspection and occasional punitive expeditions to remind Melanesians of French presence.⁸ Henri Rivière, senior officer of the local naval division, later recalled that in May 1878 'there had been so little question of *Canaques*' during his two years in the colony 'that I could believe that they did not exist or no longer existed'. Governor Olry, announcing the outbreak of war in June 1878, marvelled that soldiers and settlers in the bush 'regarded *canaques* as big children, sometimes sulky, but always inoffensive, they enjoyed a truly strange confidence, even intimacy'.⁹

What wishful thinking deemed quiescence might, however, more aptly be categorised as widespread Melanesian readiness to pursue peaceful coexistence with Europeans to the limits of toleration; equally, some prepared to defend those limits with the club. In terms of permanent, effective colonial control,

⁵ There were four theatres, from both French and Kanak perspectives: Ouraïl and Bouloupari-Thio from 25–26 June 1878; Poya-Koné from 11 Sept.; Bouraïl from 22 Sept. Kanak boundaries differed from French, however, and the Kanak campaigns overlapped markedly. The war followed a similar pattern in Ouraïl and Bouloupari-Thio, but the character and conduct of the northern campaigns were significantly different. Constraints of space and desire for a coherent case study dictated a particular focus in this paper. The Ouraïl theatre was better documented, before and after the onset of war, and offered more promise for re-analysis along the lines proposed, since there the conventional 'outcome' seemed most clear-cut. 'Ouraïl' means the French administrative district of that name; the Melanesian coastal settlement from which the name derived is referred to as 'Uaraï'.

⁶ E.g., Belich argued that ultimate Maori defeat in the New Zealand wars of the 1860s was qualified by the considerable 'degree of their success along the way'. The eventual decline in Maori power and autonomy owed most to land selling and depopulation during the subsequent peace and was mitigated by the self-confidence engendered and the respect earned by their 'formidable resistance'. James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland 1986), 298, 305–10.

⁷ E.g., 'Extrait du "Journal de M.-J. Mauger"', 22 June 1878, reproduced in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 231.

⁸ Anon., 'New Caledonia', *Australasian*, 23 Sept. 1871; Gaultier de la Richerie to Min., 15 Oct. 1872, ANOM, Carton 32; Charles Lemire, *Voyage à pied en Nouvelle-Calédonie et description des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (Paris 1884), 121.

⁹ Henri Rivière, *Souvenirs de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. L'insurrection canaque* (Paris 1881), 78–9; Olry to Min., 6 July 1878, ANOM, Carton 43.

much of the main island outside the south remained unconquered in 1878.¹⁰ Yet throughout the 1870s, penal and free colonisation had steadily expanded along the extensive plains of the mid-west coast, with little concern for the livelihood and sensibilities of Melanesians. It is undoubtedly significant that the groups most active in covertly planning and initiating the 1878 war were among those most affected and outraged by their experiences at that time, though many had enjoyed good initial relations with European settlers. Melanesians in the La Foa region protested in vain about the insufficiency of reserves to which they were legally confined in 1877, while in areas of European pastoral settlement complaints about the devastation of gardens by unfenced stock often went unheard.¹¹ In shocked retrospect in the aftermath of the 'Great Revolt', Europeans redefined the mid-1870s as the deceptive calm before the storm, and rhetorically transformed simple savages into treacherous, inscrutable ones: 'We must forever mistrust the natives who are not "big children", but like all savages are secretive and vindictive', recommended a pamphlet published locally during the war.¹²

As with the nature of the outcome, most accounts, contemporary and later, concurred that the war of 1878 displayed an unusual degree of Melanesian premeditation and detailed plotting, though European motives for advancing such a thesis could be racist, self-serving or romantically pro-Kanak.¹³ Substantial military alliances, lengthily orchestrated, were not unknown in Melanesian fighting in New Caledonia, however, before or after contact with Europeans. From court martial evidence given by the chief Aréki, who alone amongst the leaders of the Kanak coalition avoided summary execution, it would seem that the core of this alliance comprised the previously rival La Foa and Fonwhary chiefs Naïna and

¹⁰ This was ruefully acknowledged in the official soul-searching inspired by the war. Arthur de Trentinian, 'Rapport sur les causes de l'insurrection Canaque en 1878', 4 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Petit-Thouars to Min., 24 Apr. 1879, ANOM, Carton 32. Jean Guiart referred to the Kanak in 1878 as 'men who tried, in a desperate spasm, to drive back the conquering colonisation'. Yet the French had *not* previously 'conquered' the districts of Bouloupari, Ourail, Moindou or Poya — colonists and penal Administration had simply moved in. The Melanesian neighbours of the settlement at Bourail had fought *with* the French on the *winning* side in a war in 1868. Jean Guiart, 'Le cadre social traditionnel et la rébellion de 1878 dans le pays de la Foa, Nouvelle-Calédonie', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 24 (1968), 109; Douglas, 'Doing ethnographic history'.

¹¹ Hilléreau to Pionnier, 29 Nov. 1878; [Hilléreau] to P., 5 Dec. 1878, Noumea, Archives de l'Archevêché (hereinafter AAN), 16.2; Trentinian, 'Rapport', ANOM, Carton 43; [Charles] Amouroux and Henri Place, *L'administration et les Maristes en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Insurrection des Kanaks en 1878-79* (Paris [1881]), 67, 103, 107; Alain Saussol, *L'héritage. Essai sur le problème foncier mélanésien en Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris 1979), 176-202, 209-14. Cf. Conseil d'administration, 6 Jan. 1876, ANOM, Carton 98; *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereinafter SMH), 12 July 1878. The highly politicised question of the 'causes' of the 1878-79 war is not at issue here.

¹² Anon., *Nouvelle-Calédonie. Insurrection des tribus canaques des circonscriptions de Bouloupari à Koné. Massacres des 26 et 27 juin et 11 septembre 1878. Liste nominative des victimes* (Noumea 1882), 130; *La Nouvelle-Calédonie. Journal d'annonces légales et judiciaires* (Noumea) (hereinafter *Nouvelle-Calédonie*), 4 July 1878; Olry to Min., 22 Aug. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43.

¹³ E.g., *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 4 July 1878; Schenck to Olry, 16 July 1878; Trentinian, 'Rapport', ANOM, Carton 43; Morris to Fraysse, 10 July, 4 Aug. 1878, AAN, 16.1; Petit-Thouars to Min., 24 Apr. 1879, ANOM, Carton 32; Anon., *Nouvelle-Calédonie. Insurrection*, 59-62; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 131; Dousse-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 95-103. Cf. Montrouzier to Fraysse, [1878], AAN, 16.1; SMH, 5 Oct. 1878; Linda Latham, 'Revolt re-examined: the 1878 insurrection in New Caledonia', *Journal of Pacific History*, 10:3-4 (1975), 48-63.

Ataï, together with other groups from Ouraïl, Pocquereux, the Ouaméni valley, Bouloupari, and the upper Thio valley. From that base, probably, a war was long planned and coordinated, with diplomatic missions to most parts of the mainland, stockpiling of ordnance and elaborate ritual preparation.¹⁴ The initial outbreaks, however, were limited to the areas around La Foa and Bouloupari and might have occurred prematurely, before the organisers had succeeded in extracting firm commitments from groups elsewhere, pre-eminently the powerful chiefdoms of Canala. It seems certain, though, that the Canala chiefs knew of the plan, if indeed they had not encouraged it with covert promise of support.¹⁵

War exploded on 25 and 26 June with successive series of coordinated surprise attacks on gendarmes, officials and settlers in the districts of Ouraïl and Bouloupari-Thio, during which some 125 men, women and children died.¹⁶ The vast majority were Europeans and about half were convicts, ex-convicts and their families. The actual assailants were often well known to their targets. Their usual stratagem was to enter houses and offices casually or on plausible errands, take nonchalant position close to their intended victims and strike simultaneously with startling violence. Bodies were often mutilated. Subsequent parties, sometimes including women and children, looted and fired the properties and carried off the booty.¹⁷ The brutality, audacity, range and obvious synchronisation of the attacks were so incompatible with the 'good-humoured, peaceful, cowardly beings' of most settlers' experience, as to seem entirely novel.¹⁸ Nearly a decade of apparent tranquillity, however, had dulled colonial memories. Sudden, drastic violence, using deception, was an honoured tactic in Melanesian fighting,¹⁹ and was long familiar in attacks on Europeans, though employed in 1878 on a far wider scale than previously.

¹⁴ Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 66, 75, 99–106; Mauger, Journal extracts, 17 July 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 244–5; Améline to Fraysse, 4 Aug. 1878, AAN, 16.1; Anova-Ataba, 'L'insurrection', 204–5, 207, 214, 217; Guiart, 'Le cadre social', *passim*.

¹⁵ The Canala chiefs had been enthusiastic allies of the French since the earliest days of the colony and their warriors had participated in numerous expeditions against other Melanesian groups. However, by the mid-1870s there was considerable unrest at Canala over the extent of European settlement. Pritzbuert to Min., 28 Jan. 1876, ANOM, Carton 32. For speculation on the nature and extent of the prior knowledge and involvement of these chiefs in the antecedents of the 1878 war see Mauger, Journal extracts, 17 July 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 245; Améline to Fraysse, 4 Aug. 1878, AAN, 16.1; Petit-Thouars to Min., 24 Apr. 1879, ANOM, Carton 32; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 129–38; Anova-Ataba, 'L'insurrection', 214; Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 99–100.

¹⁶ Anon., *Nouvelle-Calédonie. Insurrection*, 54–8; Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 103–11; Saussoil, *L'héritage*, 216–23.

¹⁷ Mauger, Journal extracts, 28 June 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 235; Olry to Min., 6 July 1878; Schenck to Olry, 16 July 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Moris to Fraysse, 10 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 114.

¹⁸ Julian Thomas [John Stanley James], *Cannibals and Convicts. Notes of Personal Experiences in the Western Pacific* (London 1886), 48; *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 4 July 1878; Edmond Plauchut, 'La révolte des canaques', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 30 (1878), 674–80.

¹⁹ E.g., Guillaume Douarre, Journal, 20 Feb. 1846, MS copy; Prosper Goujon, Journal, 9 Nov. 1849, TS copy, AAN; Jules Patouillet, *Voyage autour du monde. Trois ans en Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris 1872), 49, 160; Victor de Rochas, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie et ses habitants. Productions, moeurs, cannibalisme* (Paris 1862), 202; Louis Turpin de Morel, 'Le nord — souvenirs', *Etudes Mélanésiennes*, 10–11 (1956–7), 147.

The tactic had, for example, been used in 1857 in the killing of 13 Europeans and 15 New Hebrideans at Mont-Dore, near Port-de-France (later Noumea). According to a retrospective participant account by the administrator Emile Foucher, this attack was a diversion planned by the Kabwa high chief Kuindo to cover a large-scale surprise assault on Port-de-France.²⁰ The main thrust was to have comprised a complex pincers movement which would strike Port-de-France from two sides, but was aborted when the defenders were alerted to the presence of one of the concealed war parties. Frontal attack on well-armed, vigilant troops holding a sound defensive position was not normally Melanesian practice. The diversion, however, achieved total surprise and almost complete success, including seizure of a large quantity of firearms and ammunition. This attribution of considerable tactical sophistication to the Melanesian leaders might have been an artefact of subsequent reflection on Foucher's part, a victor's *post facto* transformation of the defeated into worthy opponents. Some of the more perceptive contemporary observers, however, also discerned in Melanesian fighting a capacity for coordination over a relatively wide area, tactical use of diversion and division of offensive forces to enhance the element of surprise.²¹ Foucher recognised that the intent of the stratagem used at Mont-Dore was 'to murder without being exposed to combat', but this pragmatic dimension, unsurprisingly, did not impress contemporary Europeans, who were appalled by the savage propensity for unexpected and intensely violent action and righteously indignant at the methods used.²² Even the naval surgeon/ethnographer Victor de Rochas, generally a sensitive interpreter of Melanesian military norms, implied dishonour in their stress on 'guile . . . surprise, nay even . . . treachery' and labelled a typical subterfuge 'a vile trap which they ornament with the name ruse of war'.²³ Yet if Foucher's assessment of the Melanesian tactical plan was correct, ruse of war is just what the Mont-Dore episode was, an important side show in a wider scenario. The failure of the latter to eventuate made these killings look like random slaughter — an interpretation congenial to most Europeans. A tactical evaluation, however, would note the careful preparation, implementation at the optimal time, and the discipline and efficiency of execution.

The initial Kanak onslaughts in 1878 displayed similar properties, with the addition of synchronisation over a much wider canvas — the attacks which scoured the Ouraïl district on the morning of 25 June spanned nearly 40 km, radiating from La Foa: 12 km south to Popidéry, 19 km northeast to Dogny, 18

²⁰ [Emile Foucher], *Coup d'oeil rétrospectif sur les premières années de l'occupation de la Nouvelle-Calédonie — Souvenirs d'un des trois moineaux, sur les épisodes et expéditions qui ont eu lieu pendant les années 1855, 1856 et 1857* (Noumea 1890), 28–36.

²¹ E.g., Rochas, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 201–2; Adolphe Mathieu, 'Aperçu historique sur la tribu des Houassios ou des Manongôés', *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Journal Officiel de la Colonie* (Noumea) (hereinafter *Moniteur*), 12 Jan. 1868; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 209–11. Cf. Belich, *The New Zealand Wars*, 109, *passim*.

²² [Foucher], *Coup d'oeil*, 14, 30; Le Bris to Min., 23 Jan. 1857, ANOM, Carton 42.

²³ Rochas, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 202.

km northwest to Moindou and the same distance southwest to Térémba, including the prison farms at Fonwhary and Tia and isolated settler households in between.²⁴ Unlike the killings at Mont-Dore, the Ouraïl and Bouloupari attacks were the main act and were presumably intended to be decisive, since Melanesian subsistence economies could not indefinitely sustain campaigns conducted on their own soil. The attacks comprised a calculated use of terror by a few hundred, at most, outgunned warriors, whose apparent intention was to eliminate European settlement at a single stroke, at least from the affected zone, to obtain vital firearms and ammunition and to ignite the active support, there and elsewhere, of hesitant allies and neutrals. Belief in the emotional and political efficacy of sudden explosions of extreme violence was a perennial element in Melanesian fighting, before and during the colonial era. Enacted in the heat of anger, fanned by magic, dance and fiery oratory, such outbursts were short-lived; they were suited, militarily and psychologically, to part-time warrior cultures which also valued restraint, reciprocity, equivalence and equilibrium.²⁵ For Europeans, however, even if they admitted Kanak provocation, premeditation, careful planning and skilful use of dissimulation, such attacks were above all expressions of savagery, rather than a tactic of war appropriate to Melanesian culture, economic circumstances and a particular strategic equation as read by the indigenous leaders. 'The New Caledonians', moralised one metropolitan writer, 'fight for their homes and their independence. Their fault and their crime is to have made on us a savage war, to have committed murder and cowardly surprises, to have butchered women and children.'²⁶

In calculating the military balance sheet in 1878–79, Europeans usually omitted the initial victims. For example, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* resident correspondent remarked:

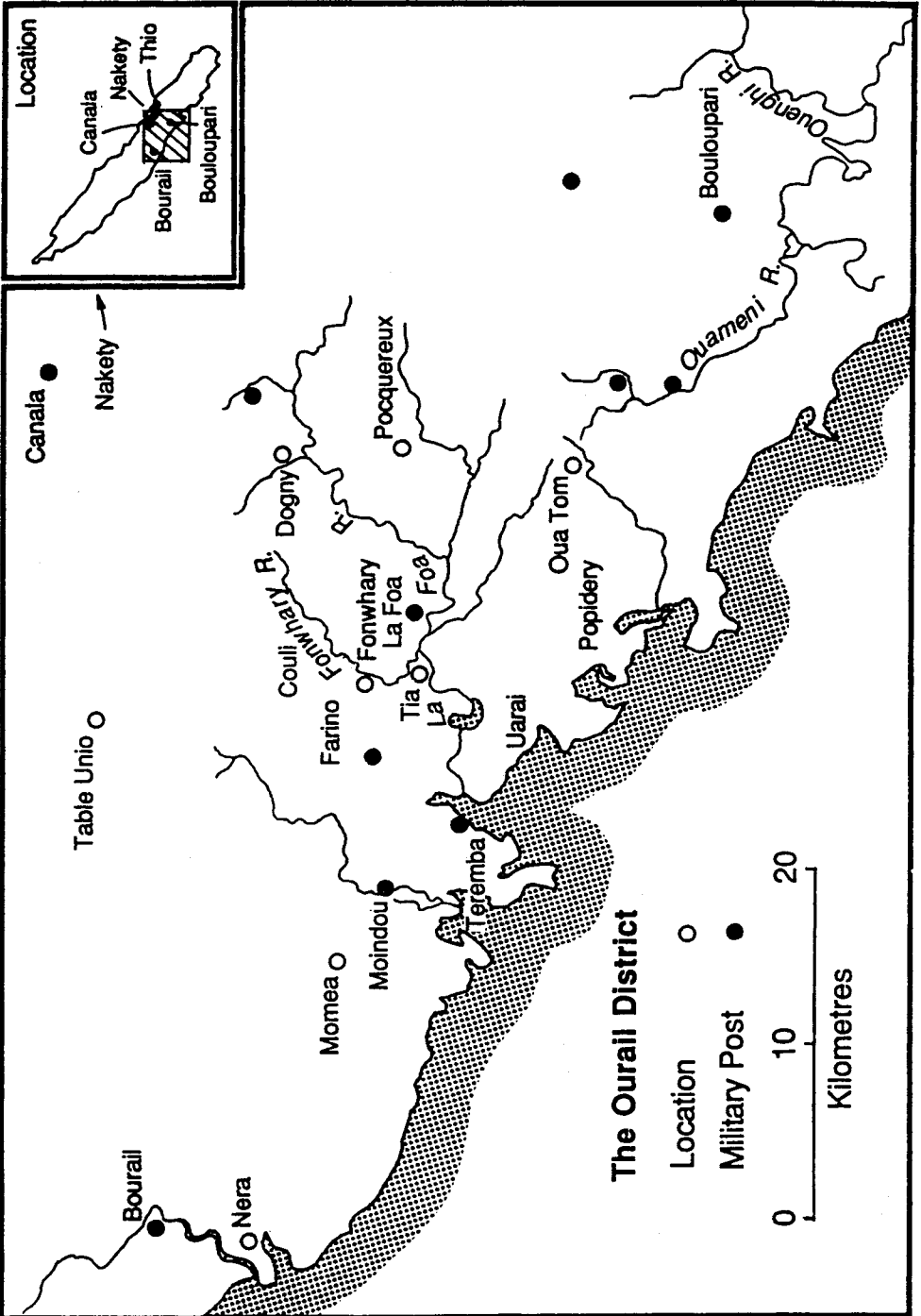
Upon the side of the whites there has been one death . . . in an ambush, and . . . one horse killed . . . Thus stands the list of killed . . . two months after the commencement of hostilities — of course exclusive of the victims which fell to the natives' treacherous axes and clubs, in number about 150.

Alain Saussol, generally a balanced commentator, also deprecated the major Kanak military achievement: 'more than 80 per cent of the effective total of victims [amongst Europeans and their dependents] succumbed to the initial

²⁴ Anon., *Nouvelle-Calédonie. Insurrection*, 54–5; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 3 July 1878, AAN, 16.1.

²⁵ Douglas, "'Almost constantly at war'?", *passim*.

²⁶ Plauchut, 'La révolte', 687; see also Mauger, Journal extracts, 30 June 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 238; Fernand Vitte, 'Nouvelle-Calédonie. L'insurrection canaque', *Missions Catholiques*, 21 Mar. 1879, 174. In contrast, European use of summary mass execution, in panic, revenge or as calculated deterrent — often of persons innocent of involvement in the war — was usually justified as no more than savages deserved, though some decried the practice as unworthy of a civilised society. E.g., Mauger, Journal extracts, 30 June 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 236; *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 4 July, 21 Aug. 1878; *SMH*, 12 July, 3 Sept. 1878; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 26, 68–9, 104–14; Anon., *Nouvelle-Calédonie. Insurrection*, 61; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 89–93.



massacres', where 'the effect of surprise' was operative.²⁷ Surprise and 'stratagem', properly employed, rank highly as offensive tactics in European war;²⁸ when used by 'savages', however, they are at best discounted, at worse denigrated as 'cowardly' and 'treacherous'.

ROSELENE Dousset-Leenhardt, consumed by romantic passion for an idealised and imaginary 'Canaquie', described the 'Insurrection' as a 'total, irreversible revolt of the New Caledonian population against the society which was in a relationship of dominance with it'. Saussol, more phlegmatic, more attuned to nuance and complexity in Melanesian socio-political relations, properly challenged this image of 'canaque monolithism' and 'the myth of a unitary and unanimous insurrection extending from the Ouenghi to the Koné'. He also argued that, both technically and tactically, 'Melanesians were badly adapted to this new war'.²⁹ These two extremes can be bridged: on the one hand, the antecedents and conduct of the war of 1878-79 displayed a probably unusual degree of Melanesian unanimity and coordination (by allies as well as Kanak), and significant innovation; on the other, there was clear evidence of ambiguous or hesitant commitment, conflicting interests, rivalries and constraints on alliance formation.³⁰ These were elements of a social landscape which still consisted of many more or less autonomous groups. They were divided by language and interests and linked by a whole range of relationships, both peaceful and antagonistic, which altered with time and circumstances and in which Europeans had come to figure on the basis largely of local considerations.

It is unclear whether the initial outbreak on 25 June 1878 did occur prematurely, or whether it represented a desperate gamble by the main instigators to try to win over waverers. Despite the heavy European losses on the first two days of the war and a momentary panic in Noumea, the Administration was not unduly perturbed once the confinement of hostilities to the Ouraïl-Bouloupari region became apparent; the Governor acknowledged, though, that the nature of the country and 'the customs of the *canaques*' meant that 'the work of repression and pacification . . . will be long and arduous'.³¹ Of critical significance was the decision taken at the outset by the chiefs of Canala to support the French, thereby reneging on any commitments made to Ataï and Naïna. By the third day of the war the Canala chiefdoms were firmly compromised: after a night march across the island to La Foa with as many as 400 warriors, including a few from

²⁷ *SMH*, 3 Sept. 1878; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 242.

²⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, abridged, J.J. Graham tr., Anatol Rapoport ed. (Harmondsworth 1968), 269-76.

²⁹ Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 23, 180; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 189, 228, 234.

³⁰ Guiart, 'Le cadre social', *passim*.

³¹ Olry to Min., 6 July 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; see also *Moniteur*, 31 July 1878.

Nakéty, their war leader Nondo was wounded in a clash with Kanak.³² Other groups were less decisive, but their reticence was also costly to the Kanak in Ouraïl. The Kawa of Couli, on the margins of the Canala zone of influence, sought protection there. The chiefs of Moindou, Moméa and Farino, closely related to Ataï, refused to commit themselves at this stage — their 'will to conserve their local autonomy, vis-à-vis the chiefs of the rebellion, being as strong as their hatred of the White', according to Guiart — while Aréki of Tom sought, without ultimate success, to remain unengaged.³³

The pro-French, ambivalent or neutral stance adopted by so many groups meant that the initial warrior strength of those opposed to the French in the Ouraïl and Bouloupari districts was exiguous. Guiart estimated their number roughly at no more than 200.³⁴ There is no convincing basis for gauging the number of participants at Bouloupari, the Ouaméni and the upper Thio valley, but precise information is available on the districts of Ouraïl, Canala/Nakéty and Houaïlou, which had been subject to delimitation of reserves in the previous two years. The report of the commission of delimitation which investigated Ouraïl from June to December 1877 listed the population, generally including gender distribution, of each 'tribe' and 'village' included administratively in the *arrondissement*.³⁵ It is therefore possible to establish a plausible estimate of the likely number of Kanak warriors available in this region at various stages, on the assumption that about 60% of the males would have been of warrior age and capacity.³⁶ The report listed 141 persons (81 females) under the 'tribe of Hattai [Ataï]', 341 persons (153 females) under various fractions of the 'tribe of La Foa[,] chief regent Naïna' and 48 persons (19 females) under the 'tribe of Uarai . . . chief Molaï [Moraï]': this gives a notional total of 167 warriors for those groups known to have been involved in the early stages of the war in Ouraïl. In addition, the warriors of Dogny (about 30) probably participated and those of

³² Olry to Min., 2 Aug. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Mauger, *Journal extracts*, 2, 17 July 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 238, 245; Améline to Frayssé, 16 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 129-33; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 95-9.

³³ Jean Caro [Maurice Leenhardt], 'Le mémorial de Poindî', *Dépêche coloniale et maritime*, 23 July 1930, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 203-6; Guiart, 'Le cadre social', 100, 113-14, 119; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 128-9, 158, 184, 186-7, 190-1, 204, 232.

³⁴ Guiart, 'Le cadre social', 118.

³⁵ Chef du Service des Domaines to Directeur de l'Intérieur, 'Rapport relatif à la délimitation de l'arrondissement d'Uarai', Conseil d'administration (Conseil privé), 19 Dec. 1877, ANOM, Carton 102.

³⁶ I have assumed that 22% of males were too young to bear arms and 18% too old or otherwise unable or unwilling to do so. According to a 'table of the population' of the 'Hienghène tribe', done 'as exactly as possible' in 1880 by the local mayor and the rural policeman, 500 out of 681 men, in a total population of 1,521, were 'able to bear arms'; 166 of the 298 'children' listed would have been male, assuming the same gender distribution as that of adults (55.7% men). This would mean a male population of 847, of whom 59% were 'warriors', 20% 'children' and 21% other non-combatants. By contrast, the report of the commission of delimitation on the Canala and Houaïlou districts in 1876 cited the number of 'children' in five 'tribes'; they amounted to 23% of the total compared with fewer than 20% at Hienghène. In no case is it clear what 'children' comprised. Gustave Kanappe, *Après 1878: les souvenirs du capitaine Kanappe*, C. Courtis ed. (Noumea 1984), 90, cf. 100-1; Chef du Service des Domaines to Directeur de l'Intérieur, 'Rapport', Conseil d'administration (Conseil privé), 17 Nov. 1876, ANOM, Carton 99.

Pocquereux (about 70) were involved at Bouloupari the next day and might have been active in Ouraïl. The grave numerical cost of the belated engagement of groups paying allegiance to Baptiste of Moindou and Aréki of Tom becomes apparent: the various elements of the 'tribe of Moindou' included 182 males, while 'the tribes of Méharé, Tom and Paraoué . . . under the domination of . . . Aliké [Aréki]' comprised 178 males. This means a notional 216 warriors who initially remained aloof. Thus the maximum number of warriors who might have been available in Ouraïl on 25 June was about 270, but the number actually involved was no doubt fewer, since it is unreasonable to assume 100% mobilisation.

On the same basis, the notional total of warriors at Canala alone was 633.³⁷ Their war leader Nondo was at times reported to have taken 300 to 500 warriors into the field. There was no consensus on the size of the party which he led to La Foa on the night of 26–27 June, but it might have outnumbered the entire Kanak force in Ouraïl.³⁸ The French effective in the colony at the beginning of the war were nearly 2,500 men, including, fortuitously, the crew of the *Tage*, more than 400 strong, and 250 marine infantry whom she was relieving. To officials on the spot this seemed few enough,³⁹ but relative to their enemy they enjoyed the immense advantages of telegraphic communication, which the Kanak were unable consistently to interrupt, and high strategic mobility, thanks to steam-powered sea transport. They were reinforced by early 1879 to more than 3,400, irregulars apart. They were, however, thinly spread — there were convicts to worry about as well as Kanak — and many, particularly the young conscripts, might not have been of high quality nor suited to footslogging under tropical conditions.⁴⁰

WITHIN a few hours of the first attacks at La Foa, Kanak had surrounded the unfortified coastal post of Térémba, the sole French military foothold in Ouraïl. It was manned at the time by only 15 men, but was 'easily defended', sited on high ground between the sea and a swamp.⁴¹ A successful assault would have

³⁷ Chef du Service des Domaines et Directeur de l'Intérieur, 'Rapport', 17 Nov. 1876, ANOM, Carton 99. A further 240 warriors, who also became allies of the French, were enumerated at nearby Nakéty. The administrator Léon Gauharou, apparently citing an official census undertaken 'with the greatest care during 1880', claimed that the 'Canala tribes' comprised a total of 574 warriors. Léon Gauharou, *Géographie de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et dépendances* (Noumea 1882), 3, 52.

³⁸ The figure cited ranged from 100, to 150, to 250, to 'more than 400'. Lecouteur to Fraysse, 3 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; Olry to Min., 6 July 1878; Maréchal to Olry, 10 July 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *SMH*, 15 Oct. 1878; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 134.

³⁹ Olry to Min., 6 July 1878, 7 Mar. 1879; Trentinian to Min., telegram, 3 Oct. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Olry to Min., 13 July, 26 Oct. 1878, Paris, Service historique de la marine (hereinafter SHM), BB4 1094. See also *SMH*, 5 Oct. 1878.

⁴⁰ Olry to Min., 6 July 1878; Anon., 'Note pour la Journal Officiel', draft, 16–17 Oct. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Olry to Min., 28 Aug., 21, 22 Nov. 1878, SHM, BB4 1094; Montrouzier to his brother, 26 Sept. 1878, AAN 9.4; Olry to Min., telegram, 26 Feb., 3 Apr. 1879, SHM, BB4 1106; *SMH*, 4, 9, 15 Oct. 1878; *L'Avenir Militaire. Journal des Armées de Terre et de Mer et de l'Armée Territoriale*, 1 Jan. 1879; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 201, 258–9; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 64, 76; Guiart, 'Le cadre social', 118.

⁴¹ *SMH*, 25 Oct. 1878.

gravely compromised the French position in this district and perhaps resolved the hesitant to risk active participation on the Kanak side. The assailants, however, seemed halfhearted and withdrew in the face of 'a few gunshots'. Their apparent pusillanimity struck Europeans as contemptible. 'If the *Kanaques* had been more resolute', wrote a missionary eyewitness, 'they [would have] annihilated Térémba'. Saussol reasoned similarly. Indeed they might, had they actually numbered the 'several hundred' of European stereotype.⁴² Moreover, most of these who invested Térémba must already have covered many kilometres that morning and engaged for some hours in the taxing tasks of ambush, killing and looting. The same missionary remarked that 'the women walked in front and appeared very tired'; in the men's case, physical fatigue would have been compounded by emotional, with the dissipation of the ritually reinforced anger which had fuelled extreme violence. The issue was shortly placed beyond doubt by the opportune arrival of the naval vessel *Vire*, which landed 33 sailors. With the debarkation the next day of troops from Noumea, the Térémba garrison amounted to 120 soldiers, 32 sailors and 36 armed deportees. Newly palisaded, the post was impregnable against an enemy lacking artillery and was henceforth to serve the French as a secure base for supply and reinforcement.⁴³

Under the shock of the initial killings, the districts of Ouraïl and Bouloupari were virtually evacuated by Europeans, their settlements abandoned to arson and plunder. The Kanak in Ouraïl, however, lacked the numbers and the resources to consolidate their advantage and prevent immediate French reoccupation of the centres of Moindou and Fonwhary. Fonwhary and Térémba, 'seriously fortified' with wooden palisades, were the first in a network of 'unasailable' military posts which were to dot the war zone and form the fulcrum of the French strategy of repression. For a while the posts were French islands in Kanak-controlled territory, but the bulk of the Kanak warriors withdrew to prepared positions in the thick bush of the lower La Foa valley. Henri Rivière, the military commandant of the district, described the valley as 'an inextricable tangle of vegetation . . . cut by ravines and little water courses and strewn with villages defended by barricades reinforced with wire taken from the telegraph'. They were, added Amouroux, 'defended in the second line by *chevaux de frise* made from dry trees, branches to the fore'.⁴⁴ Tactical withdrawal notwithstanding, the Kanak continued to burn buildings previously overlooked; they cut telegraph wires as fast as they could be repaired, though messages continued to

⁴² Lecouteur to Fraysse, 3 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 109, 117; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 217-18.

⁴³ Lecouteur to Fraysse, 3 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; Vanauld to Olry, 26 June 1878; Olry to Min., 6 July 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 108-13, 117-18, 122-5, 157.

⁴⁴ Olry to Min., 6 July, 2, 28 Aug. 1878; Vanauld to Olry, 26 June 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 112-25, 185, 186-7; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 57; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 111.

get through; they targeted the enemy's war leaders, killing the military commandant of the colony in an ambush.⁴⁵

As a general policy Kanak avoided face-to-face confrontation with armed troops: 'they carefully avoid engagements and limit themselves to surprises', commented the missionary Fr Xavier Montrouzier. Little in either their military culture or particular strategic situation in Ouraïl — outnumbered, outgunned, their heartland already strewn with enemy strongpoints — inclined them to reckless offence against the odds; this was prudence rather than want of courage, as some of their opponents acknowledged.⁴⁶ Kanak disinclination to confront French firepower and their elusiveness in difficult, intimately-known terrain forced the latter to adopt an indiscriminate strategy of attrition, striking at the means of subsistence rather than enemy warriors directly: 'fire and destruction had been applied to the native villages and plantations within easy distance [of the posts] . . . It was the Canaque system of warfare, which it was supposed they would feel most.'⁴⁷ Governor Olry complained that 'everywhere the enemy is unattainable, dispersing in the woods when we advance and coming back close on our heels when we return to camp'. The Governor's imagery betokened his dilemma as well as his ethnocentrism: Kanak were 'ferocious beasts' whose 'lair's' must be destroyed; the countryside must be 'scoured' (*fouillé*), 'cleaned out' (*nettoyé*), 'purged'.⁴⁸ Since the first days of the colony, similar complaints and imagery had punctuated colonial documentation like a refrain, rationalising recourse to attrition in both the earlier wars as well as numerous smaller campaigns and expeditions. Though promising eventual reduction of the enemy by hardship and starvation, it was not the preferred mode of the French military, since it was slow, costly, 'exhausting and arduous', immensely frustrating and scarcely honourable.⁴⁹ Saussol, whose assessment of Melanesian military performance is not at all generous, sees the initial French adoption of a strategy of 'total war' (i.e., 'attrition') in the 1850s as 'an admission of weakness. It was, in the short term, the sole means by which the military authority might suppress guerilla bands which its relatively weak forces did not permit it to control.'⁵⁰ Arguably, however, it was Melanesian military *effectiveness* which forced such an onerous and discreditable strategy on the French, even when the latter enjoyed considerable numerical advantage.

⁴⁵ Olry to Min., 6 July 1878; Olry, 'Récit détaillé des événements de l'insurrection canaque', 28 Sept.–24 Oct. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *Moniteur*, 10, 17 July 1878; *SMH*, 9 Aug., 15, 25 Oct. 1878; Lemire, *Voyage*, 70–1; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 138, 144–9, 185.

⁴⁶ Montrouzier to his brother, 26 Sept. 1878, AAN, 9.4. Olry referred to Kanak as 'persistent', 'tenacious and brave' while an English volunteer described their 'boldness' as 'astonishing'. Olry to Min., 28 Aug., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *SMH*, 17 Aug., 3 Sept., 28 Nov. 1878; cf. Thomas, *Cannibals*, 58–60.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 62; *SMH*, 3 Aug., 3 Sept. 1878.

⁴⁸ Olry to Min., 6 July, 2 Aug., 28 Sept. 1878, 1 May 1879, ANOM, Carton 43.

⁴⁹ E.g., Testard to Fourichon, 23 Oct. 1856, SHM, BB4 1604; Testard to Min., 8 June 1858; Durand to Min., 26 May 1860, ANOM, Carton 42; Durand to Min., 4 Mar. 1861, Paris, Archives Nationales, Section Marine, BB3 725; Jules Garnier, 'Voyage à la Nouvelle-Calédonie', *Tour du Monde*, 13 (1868), 50–8; *Moniteur*, 14 Feb. 1869; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 186–91, 257–9; Douglas, "'Almost constantly at war'?", 39–42.

⁵⁰ Saussol, *L'héritage*, 69.

Thus were the main elements of French strategy defined: 'to set up fortified posts amongst the insurgents around which mobile columns have been constantly in motion', thrusting 'into rebel country, crossing it in every direction, burning villages and destroying plantations'; 'to detach from the revolt as many tribes as possible by rallying them to our cause'.⁵¹ Success in the latter enterprise would not only deprive the Kanak of sorely-needed warrior numbers, but also provide the sole effective means — Melanesian allies — by which the French could strike directly against them and hope to kill or capture suspected murderers. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* resident correspondent accurately predicted:

(June 30) The troops will do well for destroying their camps and villages and protecting the different centres round which the 'colons' are rallying, but 'tis the native element that will give the best account in the pursuit of the murdering savages, as is well known to all old experienced colonists.⁵²

For two months the French war effort consisted of haphazard mass expeditions to burn Kanak settlements, destroy food crops and trees and clear bush which might harbour lurking assassins. They hardly ever saw an enemy.⁵³ In Noumea colonists and officials chafed for vengeance and an end to this humiliatingly prolonged war; more to the point, it was widely feared that the tardiness of the repression might have 'a disastrous effect in the tribes which have not yet taken part in the movement'.⁵⁴ These fears seemed to have been realised from mid-August when the killing of several settlers at Moindou apparently signalled the entry into the conflict of Baptiste and the groups within his sphere of influence; a month later war broke out further north, around Poya and Bourail. According to a local tradition, however, Baptiste had been deliberately compromised by other Kanak, who contrived the discovery of European human remains in his house.⁵⁵ In the Poya region there was a longstanding local conflict in which a settler had become embroiled. The mass killing of Europeans on 11 September, which provoked colonial intervention, was neither a reflex of previous French inaction nor a 'revolt' against colonial authority. Rather, it pertained to local grievances and the lust for firearms of the contending parties.⁵⁶ The inhabitants of coastal settlements at Bourail, previously allies of the French, had earlier rejected overtures from the Kanak in Ourail. Far from taking advantage of col-

⁵¹ Olry to Min., 2 Aug., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *SMH*, 15 Oct. 1878; Petit-Thouars to Min., 24 Apr. 1879, ANOM, Carton 32.

⁵² *SMH*, 12 July, 5 Oct. 1878; Moris to Fraysse, 4 Aug. 1878, AAN, 16.1; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 64-5.

⁵³ Olry to Min., 6 July, 2, 28 Aug. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *SMH*, 3 Sept. 1878; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 128-91, 200; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 61-72, 82-6; cf. Lecouteur to Fraysse, 6, 19, 25 July 1878, AAN, 16.1.

⁵⁴ Mauger, Journal extracts, 12 July, 1 Aug. 1878, in Dousset-Leenhardt, *Terre natale*, 243, 245; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 29 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; *SMH*, 10 Aug., 3 Sept. 1878.

⁵⁵ Guiart, 'Le cadre social', 100, 113; *Moniteur*, 4 Sept. 1878; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 186-7, 190-1, 204; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 76, 86-8.

⁵⁶ Olry to Min., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 20 Oct. 1878; Roussel to Pionnier, 4 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2; *Moniteur*, 17 July, 25 Sept. 1878; *SMH*, 3 Aug., 3 Sept., 4, 22 Oct. 1878; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 234.

onial inertia, their eventual entry into open hostilities with the French after 20 September was precipitated by the sack of their houses and gardens by nervous colonial authorities. Anticipating an attack, the latter sparked what they would have preferred to avoid.⁵⁷

By mid-August Rivière, frustrated by the stalemate in Ouraïl, had determined on less indiscriminate, more focused tactics. He built a new post at La Foa, 'the very centre of the insurrection', and handpicked an élite column of 30 *francs-tireurs*, who adopted Melanesian-style methods of bush-fighting. They were tough, older men, sailors and deportees, who, by moving fast and light, avoiding trails and using ambush and surprise, were sometimes able to come to grips with the Kanak and inflict personnel losses on them. Rivière's account revealed how Kanak invulnerability had forced him to adopt Melanesian tactics, but by shamelessly romanticising 'the column' he made a virtue of necessity and disguised the extent to which it was only one element in a grinding French strategy of attrition:

They have taken on the qualities of savages, patience and ruse, roughing it, complaining neither about privations, nor heat, nor cold. The nights . . . they pass less in sleeping than in keeping watch, lie in wait, prepare their [next] stroke. It is not that they always succeed; but always and more and more, they create a vacuum around them and spread terror.⁵⁸

Henceforth, while the policy of destruction continued apace, much of the actual fighting in Ouraïl on the French side was done by *francs-tireurs* and by Canala warriors.⁵⁹

Two proximate events altered the character of the war in this theatre. Whether from slow decision-making or inability to muster a sufficient force in time, Kanak leaders delayed an all-out attack on the new post until 24 August, when its palisade was completed. The eventual offensive represented a massive investment of coordination and effort by most of the Kanak in Ouraïl, including Moindou and Tom, under the direction of Moraï of Uaraï and Naïna. Aréki, whose aloofness had not saved his settlements and gardens from the torch, was present, Ataï seemingly not. It comprised a noisy feint by 'two hundred' warriors, while from another direction the main body, 'several hundred' strong, moved in silently under cover of a fold of ground. The French commander held his fire and was able to repel the main assault. The diversion's failure doomed the attack, since the assailants had few firearms, though they maintained a hail of slingstones for two hours, wounding three defenders. Bloodstains were the only traces of Kanak casualties, but prisoners later revealed that Moraï had been

⁵⁷ Gilibert to Fraysse, 4 July 1878, AAN, 16.1; 25 Sept. 1878, AAN, 16.2; Lecouteur, 'Bulletin militaire', 13, 21, 22, 24 Sept. 1878; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 20 Sept., 22 Oct., 24 Nov. 1878; [Hilléreau] to P, 5 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2; Olry to Min., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *SMH*, 22 Oct. 1878.

⁵⁸ Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 186–204, 213–18, 228, 237; *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 4 Sept. 1878.

⁵⁹ Olry, 'Récits détaillés', 28 Sept. 1878–21 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 213–79.

mortally wounded. This was the last instance of Kanak coordination for offensive purposes in the Ouraïl theatre.⁶⁰

Henceforth the La Foa post was a major base for expeditions. Its elevated position enabled the French to monitor Kanak encampments in the nearby valleys through the traces of their fires. On 1 September it was the departure point for a coordinated thrust into the La Foa valley by three columns comprising 110 Frenchmen and about 200 Canala warriors. A further 100 or so troops were posted at key points on the margins of the valley to bar escape, while a separate column operated out of Moindou. This day saw 16 or 17 Kanak killed to three of their opponents wounded; about 60 Kanak women and children were taken by the allies. The quality of the victims made it one of the most successful French actions of the war — they included Ataï, a priest and Baptiste of Moindou. Otherwise it was a partial failure, since Naïna and most of the Kanak warriors escaped.⁶¹ Not so from the French perspective at the time: that night at La Foa they sang, danced and fired a victory salvo from a small cannon, watched curiously by the men of Canala who had done the actual killing. 'This day', exulted Rivière, 'was a real success', of 'decisive importance' for the course of the repression in Ouraïl. According to his analysis of the phases of the war:

[We had] at first to keep on the defensive, then take the offensive with sufficient forces and, after long and painful efforts while we dealt with *Canaques en masse*, reach the stage of the destruction of wandering, if still armed bands. That is where we are [now] . . . The real man chase is about to begin.

Olry's reports — written for his superiors' consumption — were equally confident: by the end of September Ouraïl and Bouloupari had been 'purged', 1,000 'rebels' were dead — an incredible figure — while those in Ouraïl had been 'entirely dispersed'. With the outbreak of war further north, he deemed himself fortunate 'not to have had to deal with all these people at once'.⁶²

From this time, certainly, the Kanak in Ouraïl fragmented into small groups and generally abandoned the lower La Foa valley for more remote locations; yet roving Kanak bands prevented the reinstallation of colonists and forced the French to continue expeditions unabated for a further three months. The troops rarely saw a Kanak, but the expeditions were extraordinarily enervating, especially with the onset of the hot season.⁶³ By the end of October the prospect of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 200–1, 209–11, 232–3; Olry, 'Récit détaillé', 28 Sept.–24 Oct. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 4 Sept. 1878; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 26–7.

⁶¹ Olry to Min., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton, 43; *Moniteur*, 4 Sept. 1878; *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 4 Sept. 1878; Lemire, *Voyage*, 74; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 200, 220–31; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 228.

⁶² Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 231, 232–3; Olry to Min., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43.

⁶³ Olry to Min., 28 Oct., 22 Nov., 22 Dec. 1878; Olry, 'Récits détaillés', 28 Sept. 1878–16 Jan. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Hilléreau to Fraysse, 26 Nov. 1878, AAN, 16.2; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 237–42, 251–5, 258–9. During December, 42 men from the *Segond* participated in two expeditions lasting a total of three weeks, during which they burned a few huts and devastated some gardens; all were 'worn out with fatigue' and 28 fell by the wayside with dysentery and severe foot injuries; despite seeing 'numerous traces' of Kanak, they encountered none, apart from four prisoners and two severed heads taken by Nondo. Sevène to Richier, 10 Dec. 1878, SHM, BB4 1604.

interminable war and the total exhaustion of his *francs-tireurs* had forced Rivière to recommend that the drive for total victory be reconsidered and peace negotiations begun. Olry's reiterated protestations that the war was over in Ouraïl/Bouloupari rang hollow and not until the end of January 1879 could he credibly announce that 'the repression is complete'.⁶⁴

OFFICIAL accounts only grudgingly divulge the resilience of the Kanak in 1878–79 and the extent of French dependence on their allies. Read with informed scepticism, however, they do provide suggestive hints, which are amplified in the otherwise interested reports of missionaries, settlers and Australian journalists. The question of the nature, meanings and military significance of allied involvement is complex. The wars in which the French became involved in the Poya-Koné region and around Bourail from mid-September differed from that in Ouraïl and Bouloupari. The Poya-Koné conflict was mainly a Melanesian affair, largely fought by them, for their own reasons, though Kanak warriors had several notable successes against French detachments. The allies eventually comprised a vast coalition, mainly from the interior and the east coast, and included some redoubtable former enemies of the French, who presumably believed that a greater threat was posed by Melanesian rivals equipped with firearms and ammunition.⁶⁵ In the Bourail theatre, the Kanak displayed great desperation and military skill, keeping the foreign community in a virtual stage of siege for more than two months: they picked off isolated settlers, regularly fired thatch roofs with slingstones trailing flaming bark and launched several attacks on French posts.⁶⁶ A missionary based at Térémba was struck by the contrast with Ouraïl: Kanak in Bourail, 'who today show so much activity and ruse, far superior in that respect to the natives of Ouraïl', 'are of unequalled audacity and unshakeable tenacity'. Missionary accounts tended to attribute the Kanak performance in Bourail to the tactical expertise of Naouno, whom fear had apparently induced to abandon his position as government interpreter and take to the bush.⁶⁷ The warriors of Houaïlou, equivocal in June, played a major role as allies of the French in this theatre, as they did further north. An earlier political line-up in the Bourail region was reversed: previously defeated inland groups joined the French in order to balance accounts with coast-dwellers who, a decade earlier,

⁶⁴ Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 257–60; Olry to Min., 5 Feb., 7 Mar. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43.

⁶⁵ Olry, 'Récits détaillés', 28 Sept. 1878–21 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 26 Oct. 1878; Lecouteur, 'Bulletin militaire', 19, 22, 25 Nov. 1878; Roussel to Fraysse, 23 Nov. 1878; Roussel to Pionnier, 4 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2; *Moniteur*, 25 Sept., 9, 16, 23, 30 Oct., 6, 13 Nov. 1878.

⁶⁶ Olry, 'Récits détaillés', 28 Sept. 1878–21 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Olry to Min. (telegram), 30 Oct. 1878; Olry to Min., 6 Nov. 1878, SHM, BB4 1094; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 24, 28, 30 Sept., 22 Oct., 19, 24, 28 Nov. 1878; Hilléreau to Fraysse, 26 Nov. 1878; [Hilléreau] to ?, 5 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2.

⁶⁷ Hilléreau to Fraysse, 26 Nov., 31 Dec. 1878; [Hilléreau] to ?, 5 Dec. 1878; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 22 Oct. 1878, AAN, 16.2.

had supported the French against them.⁶⁸ Patterns of allied motivation and engagement in the several theatres varied, but everywhere their contributions were critical.

The Canala chiefdoms were by far the most important allies during the initial phases of the war; they and the warriors of Nakéty were the major allies in the Ouraïl theatre, which was the main arena for their activities. The question of the motives of the Canala leaders is not at issue here, but it was perhaps significant that their *entente* with Ataï and Naïna, if it occurred, was far newer than their long-standing, profitable alliance with the French; more recently they had competed with these chiefs for influence over the high valleys above La Foa.⁶⁹ They must have had a far more lively appreciation of French military potential than many other Melanesians, such as those in Ouraïl and Bouloupari who would rarely have seen European soldiers: the warriors of Canala had participated in numerous French punitive expeditions, while in 1875 a 'plan of revolt against the whites, organised by the chiefs of . . . Canala' was prematurely revealed and neutralised by brisk deployment of troops.⁷⁰ Colonial myth attributed their decision in June 1878 to the courage and audacity of Servan, the French commandant at Canala, who accompanied Nondo and his warriors on their initial foray across the island and was assumed to control their actions: according to the Australian journalist Stanley James, 'they obeyed like children'.⁷¹ The logistic and political significance of Canala support was profound.⁷² Militarily, they steadily expanded their role. By the middle of August Nondo's original war party had all gone home, but his warriors returned *en masse* for the operation of 1 September. Colonial accounts gave most of the credit for this action to the energy and bravery of the French troops and their leaders. The Canala men seemed unusually 'worried and hesitant' and Rivière wondered whether they were afraid of Ataï or ashamed of fighting him. It was, however, the allies who actually attacked and beheaded all those killed in the La Foa valley, including Ataï. Subsequently they made frequent incursions to Ouraïl, sometimes accompanied by Servan, but increasingly under Nondo's independent direction and control. There was no question about their responsibility for the death of Naïna in January 1879. Nondo was eventually admitted to French councils of war. James admired his sense of 'strategy; for, with pieces of bread, he marked out on the dinner-table the mode of attack to be pursued on a large party of the

⁶⁸ Lecouteur, 'Bulletin militaire', 1 Nov. 1878; Gilibert to Fraysse, 19 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2; *Moniteur*, 25 Sept., 9, 23 Oct., 6, 13 Nov. 1878; Douglas, 'Doing ethnographic history'.

⁶⁹ Tardy de Montravel to Min., 8 July 1854, ANOM, Carton 40; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 57, 93.

⁷⁰ Pritzbuier to Min., 28 Jan. 1876, ANOM, Carton 32.

⁷¹ Thomas, *Cannibals*, 95-102; Olry to Min., 2 Aug. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; *SMH*, 15 Oct. 1878; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 12-13; Lemire, *Voyage*, 71; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 129-37, 164, 176, 195.

⁷² See above; Maréchal to Olry, 10 July 1878; Olry to Min., 27 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 13.

rebels . . . Nondo was as good a general as any French officer in New Caledonia' — this from a man who had ridiculed the tactical sense of Ataï and the other Kanak leaders in Ouraïl and Bouloupari.⁷³

The French, rarely comfortable with the Canala alliance, were generally suspicious of the chiefs' motives, actions and reliability: 'I have only mediocre trust in our allies', allowed Olry; 'while using them, I supervise them'.⁷⁴ Their role in the death of Ataï was thought so compromising as to ensure their future loyalty, but their pride in their effectiveness and successes provoked a racist response, as well as the professional jealousy of the military.⁷⁵ Olry described the 'emotion' inspired in settlers at Canala by 'the attitude of . . . Nondo, whose arrogance was daily more pronounced. [He was] proud of the success he had obtained, and that he owes in large part to the inspiring manner in which he commands the natives'. Amouroux, a deportee at Canala, instanced this 'attitude': Nondo 'cries loudly that without him the rebel *kanaks* would have killed all the whites; that he is the Kanala high chief of the whites as well as the blacks'. James was told by infantry officers that the Canala allies 'were but a lot of vagabond pillagers, little better than the insurgents, whom it would be well, by-and-by, to exterminate', while a senior naval officer deplored their tendency 'to want to monopolise devotion to our cause and to regard themselves as indispensable to our security'. Between the Canala warriors and the *francs-tireurs* there was 'a rivalry of effort and of success . . . The column liked to assert itself without the *Canaques*, and Nondo, for his part, preferred to act alone with his warriors without anyone knowing too much about what he did.'⁷⁶

The allies' propensity for independent action in pursuit of what they conceived as their own interests was galling for settlers and authorities alike: 'much dissatisfaction is expressed against the conduct of the friendly natives . . . They are accused of seeking more after the spoils of war and enriching themselves, without much care at whose expense, rather than killing the enemy.'⁷⁷ Cold-blooded obliteration of opponents, however, was not normally practised in Melanesian fighting; killing occurred in heat and victors preferred to absorb the defeated, particularly women and children, or incorporate them within their sphere of influence. In 1878 it was agreed from the outset that the allies' legitimate booty should include captured women and children: 'I surrender to you in all propriety', went the Governor's official pronouncement to the warriors of

⁷³ Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 223, 227, 229, 246–79; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 103–9, cf. 59–60; Olry, 'Récits détaillés', 28 Sept. 1878–21 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 35–6, 38.

⁷⁴ Olry to Min., 2 Aug. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 82–3; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 154, 249.

⁷⁵ *Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 31 July, 21 Aug. 1878; *SMH*, 13 Sept., 9 Oct. 1878; Moris to Fraysse, 1 Jan. 1879, AAN, 16.2.

⁷⁶ Olry, 'Récit détaillé', 24 Oct.–22 Nov. 1878; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 83, 93; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 101; Essarts to Olry, 'Rapport détaillé sur les événements . . . dans le Nord', 8 Dec.–20 Jan. 1879, in Olry, 'Récit détaillé', 16 Jan.–5 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 249.

⁷⁷ *SMH*, 3 Sept. 1878.

Canala, 'the women of your enemies and all the plunder that you can make in their villages'.⁷⁸ In October 1878 there were several puzzling encounters with Nondo's warriors in the disputed hinterland between Canala and La Foa. The commander of the *francs-tireurs* was convinced that 'a great part of the revolted tribes . . . deprived of their chiefs, have taken refuge on the territory of Nondo'. Rivière came to the disquieting belief that Nondo 'was engaging in pacification to his own profit', camouflaged by regular prestations to the French of the severed heads of warriors who refused his terms. Rivière wondered, chastened, whether energetic harassment by the *francs-tireurs* served only to drive Kanak more readily into Nondo's arms.⁷⁹ Guiart argues that 'the principal war aim of the Canalas was attained, once the limit of their zone of influence was acknowledged to include the region of Table Unio and the back country of Couli and La Foa'; it is likely, however, that the Canala chiefs aimed also to protect their dependents in these areas and to mitigate the impact of the repression on any Kanak who were prepared to accept their authority.⁸⁰

By late in 1878 the urgent need to bring the war to a close inspired Rivière to take a leaf from Nondo's book. On balance, he decided, the chief's colonising activities had worked to French advantage and he recommended that the government adopt Nondo's strategy, by offering clemency to warriors who surrendered and agreed to accept exile. Servan and Olry concurred. Both French and Kanak were exhausted, but Kanak in Ouraïl and Bouloupari, never numerous, were starving; Olry believed that 'the rebels are weary of war; . . . they all seem very vexed with their chiefs who push them to fight to the bitter end'.⁸¹ In their own wars and in earlier colonial confrontations, Melanesians had seen no virtue in continuing a struggle when human and material costs were liable to be too high, as Jean-Marie Tjibaou recently recognised: 'the choice has always been to avoid massacres'.⁸² The surrender process started at the end of December in Ouraïl and quickly snowballed, mediated by Nondo and Naouno, the former Bouraïl interpreter, who looked to Rivière like 'a savage fitted for this role [of intermediary] and who, in contrast to Nondo, worked only for us'.⁸³ A month

⁷⁸ Olry to warriors of Canala, 11 July 1878, MS copy; Moris to Fraysse, 26 July 1878; Servan to Antonio, 1 Aug. 1878; Améline to Fraysse, 4 Aug. 1878, AAN, 16.1; Olry to Min., 28 Sept. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Moris to Fraysse, 6 Nov. 1878; Gilibert to Fraysse, 19 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2; *SMH*, 15 Oct. 1878; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 138, 157, 225-6, 277; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 109-10.

⁷⁹ Olry, 'Récit détaillé', 24 Oct.-22 Nov. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 248-9, 255-8; Hilléreau to Fraysse, 26 Nov. 1878, AAN, 16.2. As early as the end of July, indications had been received from prisoners that the 'rebels . . . are discouraged and seek refuge with faithful tribes'. *Moniteur*, 31 July 1878.

⁸⁰ Guiart, 'Le cadre social', 115; Garnier to Fraysse, 24 Oct. 1878; Moris to Fraysse, 1 Jan. 1879, AAN, 16.2.

⁸¹ Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 257-60; Olry, 'Récit détaillé', 24 Oct.-22 Nov. 1878, ANOM, Carton 43; Amouroux and Place, *L'administration*, 62.

⁸² Helen Fraser, interview with Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *Times on Sunday*, 22 Nov. 1987.

⁸³ Rivière was 'astonished and charmed' by Naouno's command of polite French, his literacy, manners and crispness of response; he had had, according to Olry, 'a dose of education'. In mission texts, however, he emerged as an able opportunist, who serially manipulated allegiance to both sides to his own advantage. Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 260-5; Olry, 'Récit détaillé', 22 Dec. 1878-16 Jan. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Lecouteur, 'Bulletin militaire', 14 Sept., 19 Oct. 1878; Lecouteur to Fraysse, 30 Sept., 22 Oct. 1878; Hilléreau to Fraysse, 26 Nov., 31 Dec. 1878; [Hilléreau] to ?, 5 Dec. 1878, AAN, 16.2; *Moniteur*, 23 Oct. 1878.

later the remnants of 'the tribes of Ataï and Naïna' capitulated to a 'column of Canalans': they comprised 35 warriors and 28 women and children, with an arsenal of two sporting-guns and one revolver. By February 1879 only a handful of Kanak remained in Ouraïl. Many had been killed, though in nothing like the numbers claimed by the French, and those of the remainder who had not found refuge on allied territory were exiled, their lands sequestered and their 'tribal' names struck from the colonial roll.⁸⁴

WHO, THEN, won this war in Ouraïl, militarily? Evidently, the French and their allies, notably the Canala. 'Winning', however, meant different things to different victors and the French did not achieve the total obliteration of their enemies which they had initially envisaged. The eventual victory came, moreover, at the cost of far more time, expense and arduous effort than most Europeans had anticipated. Olry's confident pronouncements of the end of September remained unrealised until the new year. How was the war won? Pre-eminently through allied agency, the possibility of which stemmed from Melanesian divisions; these, in turn, contributed to the paucity of Kanak personnel. The Kanak arsenal was also markedly inferior: their lack of firearms was disastrous in offence, though it mattered far less defensively, because of the temperamental nature of the *chassepot*, the very poor marksmanship of French troops and the agility and elusiveness of Melanesians.⁸⁵

In socio-political terms, the allies achieved their immediate political goals while the French won handsomely, though colonists suffered considerable material loss and psychological trauma; virtually the entire Kanak population disappeared from Bouloupari, Ouraïl and much of Bourail, leaving vast tracts of land available for unencumbered European settlement. The costs to the vanquished Kanak and the dour persistence of the French intimidated many Melanesians for a long time; few, including allies, had illusions about the likely efficacy of wholesale recourse to force. The allies received no reliable guarantee of peaceful, inviolate enjoyment of their own country in the future; only a few months after the war ended, Olry reported that 'numerous disputes, on the subject of delimitation of land, had arisen between colonists and natives in the region between Canala and Tuo'.⁸⁶ These were resolved satisfactorily at the time and the day of reckoning over land was at least postponed at Canala, until the onset of serious expropriation in the 1890s.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Olry, 'Récits détaillés', 22 Dec. 1878–21 Feb. 1879; Olry to Min., 28 Sept. 1878, 5 Feb. 1879, ANOM, Carton 43; Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 261–78; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 242–9.

⁸⁵ Rivière, *Souvenirs*, 196; Thomas, *Cannibals*, 72, 75–6.

⁸⁶ Olry to Min., 27 June 1879, SHM, BB4 1106.

⁸⁷ Jean-Pierre Doumenge, *Paysans mélanésiens en pays Canala — Nlle Calédonie* (Talence 1974), 83–6; Saussol, *L'héritage*, 271–3, 281–304.

The question mark of the title and arguments developed here about Melanesian agency apply with even more force to the campaigns in Bourail and Poya-Koné; from the Kanak perspective Ourail was very much a worst-case scenario. Further north, Kanak disadvantage in numbers and ordnance was less stark and they were able to maintain effective offensive modes for far longer, despite massive allied opposition. The allies' significance was patent and paramount, to the extent that in the Poya-Koné theatre French interests and involvement were often peripheral. Accordingly, outcomes were even more ambiguous in both military and political terms.⁸⁸

Malice and mistrust were pronounced in most contemporary assessments by the French military of the allied contribution in 1878–79. At best they acknowledged a key subordinate role, necessitated by the very nature of savagery, natural as well as human; thus the retrospective evaluation of an infantry officer who participated in the final stages of the repression:

The Canalans . . . helped us, in this difficult country, to stamp out the rebels. Without them it would have been almost impossible for us to catch them in their mountains and ravines covered with inextricable forests, through which they run as nimble as cats. They burden themselves with nothing: no load, no clothes, they carry only their arms. We caught up with them by surprise, thanks to our *canaque* allies who, knowing the country well[,] guided us and helped us to surprise them.

Stanley James thought little of the performance of either savages or Frenchmen, but he is sufficiently persuasive to warrant the last word: 'Almost everything which has been done, except the destruction of plantations, in which the French soldiers excel, has been by the Canaque auxiliaries'.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Douglas, "'Almost constantly at war'?", 37–8.

⁸⁹ Kanappe, Note, 9 Jan. 1880, in Kanappe, *Après 1878*, 105; *SMH*, 15 Oct. 1878.