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Cultural identity of New Caledonia on the example of inhabitants of the Isle of Pines

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ABSTRACT

Cultural identity of the inhabitants of New Caledonia is at the stage of deeper and deeper absorption of Western culture patterns, while striving at the same time to preserve traditional cultural learning that is based on mythical thinking. Traditional perception of the world, and the resulting types of activities, gives way to modern professions connected with tourism services and the use of advanced technologies.

Keywords: Melanesia, mythical thinking, Kanak, Melanesian culture, cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity is a historically conditioned, cultural manner of preserving by a given human community the existence and continuity of the species and the biopsychical equilibrium, the element of which in primitive cultures can be mythical thinking. Cultural identity in the era of the cultural change comprises, in addition to the transfer of cultural tradition contents, the cultural structure and institutions and the external context in which a given culture functions. Mythical thinking is a way of thinking being characteristic of the man of traditional culture in which the myth plays a role of a universal story that explains and provides the man with reasons for his position in the world. Mythical thinking refers to a certain state of knowledge about the world in which the specific nature of certain natural

phenomena that took place in a mythical time of the beginnings is being explained by the actions of gods and heroes. Mythical thinking occurs before the so called first demystification of the world, therefore at the magical stage of culture when all activities had their symbolic dimension. Most activities, apart from the basic pragmatic sense, had a mythical sense.

New Caledonia is an overseas territory belonging to France. The main island of New Caledonia (Grande Terre), along with the Loyalty Islands and other smaller islands laying nearby, is located in the south-west Pacific Ocean, some 1300 km east of Australia. New Caledonia is characterised by a mountainous landscape and a tropical mild climate.

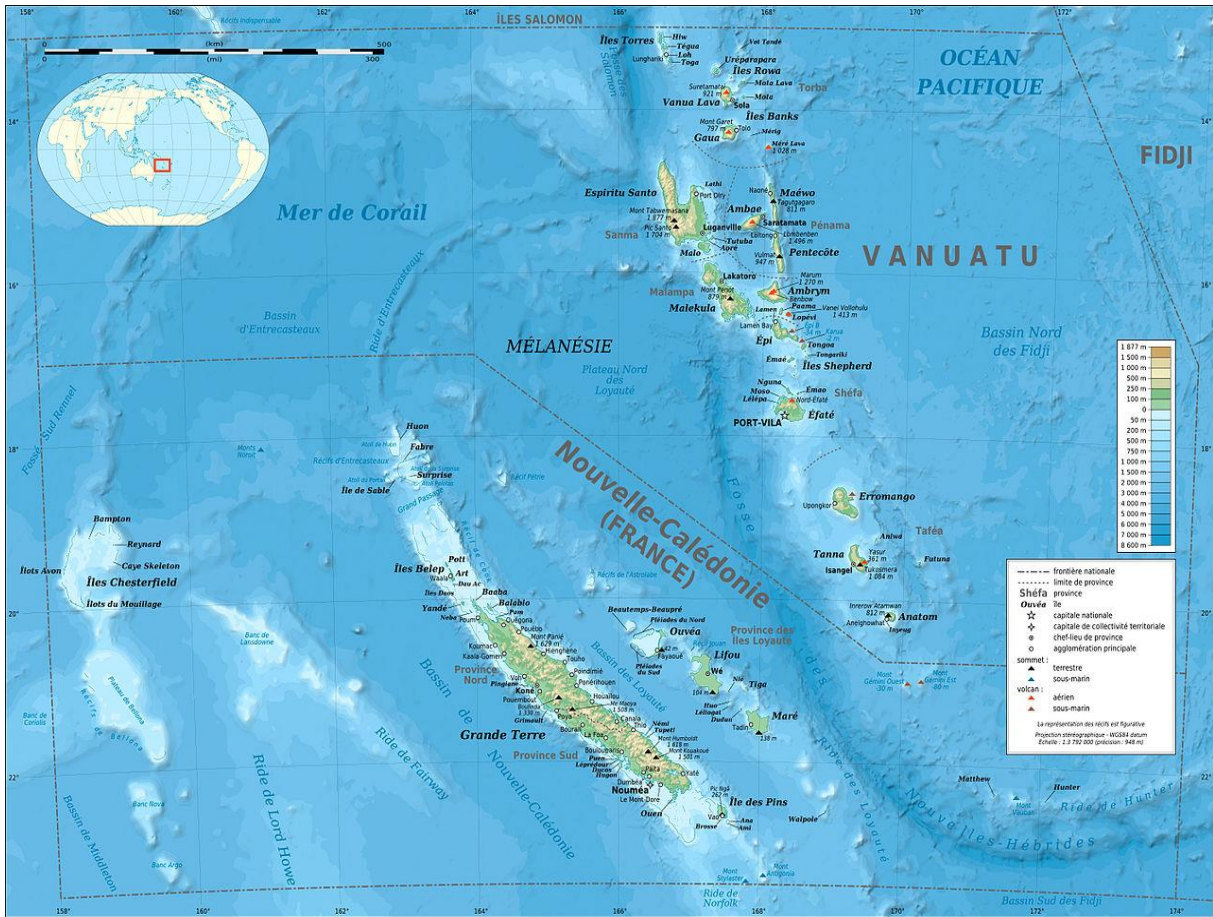


Photo 1. Map of New Caledonia

Source: <https://pl.wikipedia.org/>

The Île des Pins (French name for the Isle of Pines; name in local Kanak language Kwênyii: Kunyié) is an island located in the Pacific Ocean, in the south-eastern part of the archipelago New Caledonia, being an overseas territory of of France. The island, because of its exceptional tourist values, is nicknamed l'île la plus proche du paradis (“the closest island to Paradise”).



Photo 2. View of the Isle of Pines from the airplane window
Source: google.com



Photo 3. Map of the Isle of Pines
Source: google.com



Photo 4. Prison gate in Ouro, Isle of Pines

Source: google.com

The island was settled by Melanesian people about 2000 years ago. Captain James Cook in 1774, as the first European, saw the island on his second voyage to New Zealand and gave it the name the Isle of Pined because of the dense Araucaria forests on its shores. Although he never disembarked on the island but, as he saw smokes from fires, he assumed that it was inhabited. In 1840, Catholic and Protestant missionaries arrived on the island, along with merchants seeking sandalwood.

France took possession of the island in 1853 and at this time indigenous people opted for the Catholic religion. In 1872, the island became a French penal colony and a place of exile for about 3000 political prisoners. Out of the group of 3000 deportees who arrived to the Isle of Pines, more than 240 one died here. They were mostly communards, participants in the Paris Commune in 1871. At their cemetery, all graves, except two, are anonymous today. The Isle of Pines was a place of exile to 1924.

Also Polish political deportees, mainly participants of the Paris Commune, arrived to French New Caledonia. Most of them, after serving a sentence, returned to France. The most famous Polish prisoner, however, was Antoni Berezowski, a participant in the January Uprising, who in 1867 attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander II of Russia in Paris. For this act, a twenty years old Polish patriot was sent into lifelong exile. He arrived to New Caledonia, with no right of return. He died here in 1916.

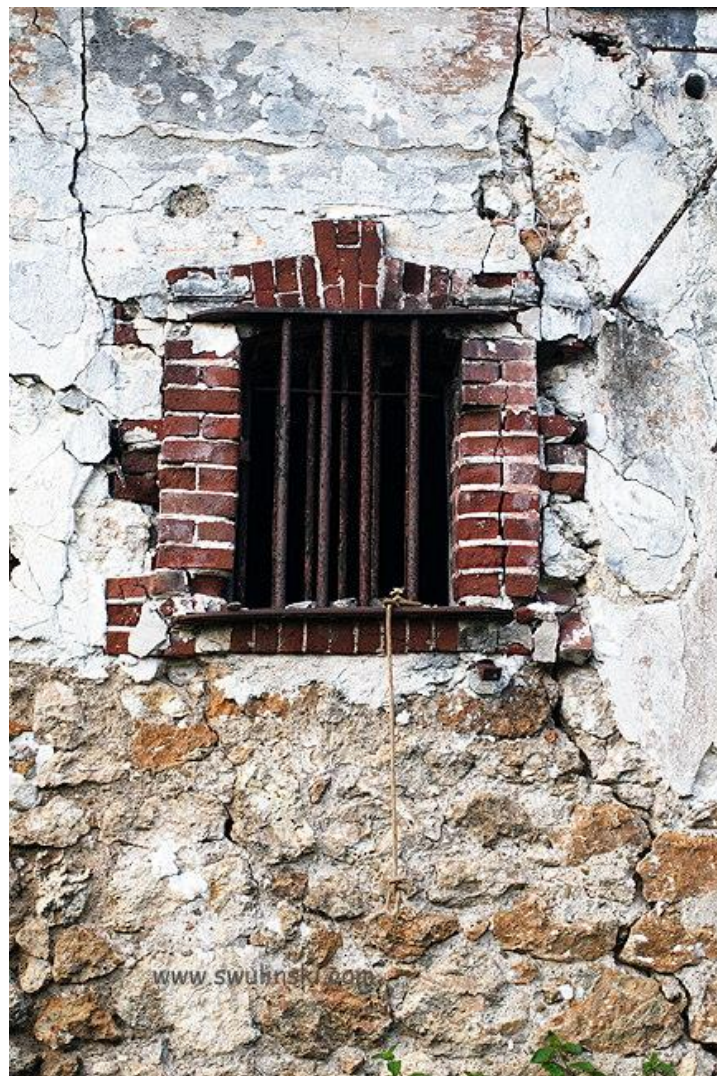


Photo 5. Bars of the prison building in Ouro, Isle of Pines
Source: google.com



Photo 6. Ruins of the prison buildings in Ouro, Isle of Pines
Source: google.com



Photo 7. Prison cemetery in Ouro, Isle of Pins
Source: google.com

The island is inhabited by about two thousand people, of which 95 percent are Melanesians and Kanaks. Kanaks call themselves Kunie and are divided into eight tribes, and each tribe has its own chief subordinated to the great chief. Each tribe has its own fields where they grow the main plant of local agriculture - the yam.



Photo 8. Yam
Source: google.com

Yam is not only the basis of their diet (next to all fish and seafood) but also a long tradition, a symbol of tribal community, sharing, life, man, and of course of the fruit of the work. It is being exchanged during the most important holidays, weddings and funerals. Inhabitants of the island plant it in September and October, so as to start the first harvest in March. At this time, the most important holiday takes place – Festival of the Yam. The entire community of the island takes part in it, special masks are being prepared on this occasion, bodies of the dancers are being painted and richly decorated.

The second activity of the inhabitants is construction of dugout canoes with triangle-shaped sails and characteristic outriggers – the entire boat resembles a modern catamaran. They are used for fishing and carrying tourists. In New Caledonia, these boats are produced only on the Isle of Pines.



Photo 9. Indigenous dugout canoe departing for fishing



Photo 10. Indigenous dugout canoe at the island's shore



Photo 11. Typical Melanesian hut

The same constructors build traditional houses with roofs in the shape of umbrellas made of the palm and banana tree leaves.



Photo 12. Interior of a Melanesian hut



Photo 13. Meeting and eating place



Photo 14. Indigenous dugout canoe on its way to the fishing ground



Photo 15. Fishing in the island's coastal zone



Photo 16. Airport on the Isle of Pines

Tourists, in the vast majority, come to the island by air, using the services of a local transportation company. In New Caledonia, where almost half of population is of the European origin, traditional Melanesian culture is slowly disappearing. The French government promotes the Western consumerist and commercialised lifestyle, so unknown to the Pacific people. The first to come were whale hunters, bringing with them unknown diseases. Next were missionaries who brought about a gradual disappearance of almost entire native culture heritage, erasing from the life and mind of indigenous people local practices and customs. Later, settlers arrived who successively took over the land. Kanaks, or indigenous inhabitants of New Caledonia, started to lose their identity. The only chance for survival of the Kanaks' culture is their desire for greater autonomy, for an independent state which, if it materialises, probably will take the name **Kanaky**.



Photo 17. Traditional Kanak totem
Source: google.com

Totemism, being the basic traditional form of beliefs in relation to the Caledonian community, remains the mythical entirety which helps the man to grasp the whole genetic world and direct his relationship with the modern world. The world of psyche is understood through totemic ideas. Melanesians, adhering to traditional views, project themselves into the real world and do not see the difference between reality and their mental life, between their ego and the world. Any behaviour of a Melanesian is inspired by intimacy that describes the relationship between the world and himself. Regression or decomposition of mythical

thinking, under influence of the trends of contemporary times, brings about destruction of this whole relationship. Regression of mythical thinking develops and increases the distance between the man and the real world. There is a gradual transition from abstract thinking, not based on the concepts of time and space, to concrete thinking.



Photo 18. Statue of Jesus Christ surrounded by local totem poles
Source: google.com

CONCLUSION

The modern culture of New Caledonia increasingly becomes susceptible to European influences. The growing interest in tourism and the trends of contemporary times coming from the central state (Metropolitan France) have a great impact on that. Modernisation refers both to using greater and greater number of modern articles and devices and inducing a change in the relationship to the surrounding world and one's own place in it. Disappearance of traditional mythical thinking is of key importance here. An independence referendum, being prepared for 20 years, has both its ardent supporters and opponents. Political and cultural revival is due to changes in mythical thinking that is being defined as the demystification of the reality.

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