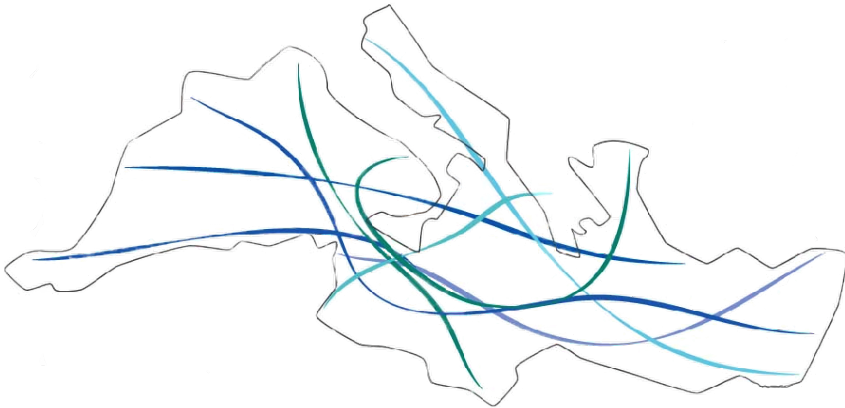


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From the Mediterranean sea to the Pacific ocean, the exile of Algerian prisoners in the penal colony of New Caledonia. An analysis of their descendants' identity processes



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From the Mediterranean sea to the Pacific ocean, the exile of Algerian prisoners in the penal colony of New Caledonia. An analysis of their descendants' identity processes

Abstract

In this article, we propose to consider the exile experience through the case of Algerian descendants in New Caledonia. The first Algerians to arrive in this territory were sentenced by the French colonial administration, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to punishments they had to serve in New Caledonia. Most of them will never be able to go back to their home country.

Our qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with nine of their descendants in New Caledonia enabled us to analyse how the descendants of these deportees define themselves in the contemporary political situation of New Caledonia where a consultation process for independence is currently underway.

The results show that the various generations of descendants did experience different relations with their Mediterranean origins and their settlement 20.000 km away in the Pacific Ocean. While the first generation lived and mingled with the deported Algerians but did not get much of the cultural background, the next generations found themselves in a period of silence and taboo of the origins, which made it difficult for them to trace their family history. By the end of the 20th century, the opening of historical archives, the development of communication technologies and the New Caledonia's political situation (independence process under current consultation) did open the way to an identity reappropriation process. Our article proposes to highlight the current impact of this forced exile on the Algerian descendants in New Caledonia but also at the Mediterranean area level through the way this historical fact is dealt with by both France and Algeria in the contemporary period.

Keywords: Exile, identity, Interculturation, Algeria, New Caledonia.

Del mar Mediterráneo al océano Pacífico, el exilio de prisioneros argelinos en la colonia penal de Nueva Caledonia. Un análisis de los procesos de identidad de sus descendientes

Resumen

En este artículo proponemos considerar la experiencia del exilio a través del caso de los descendientes de argelinos en Nueva Caledonia. Los primeros argelinos que llegaron a ese territorio eran condenados por la administración colonial francesa, en el siglo XIX y principios del XX, a penas que debían cumplir en Nueva Caledonia. La mayoría de ellos nunca pudo regresar a su país de origen.

Nuestra investigación cualitativa, basada en entrevistas semiestructuradas con nueve de sus descendientes, nos permitió analizar cómo se definen a sí mismos en la situación política actual de Nueva Caledonia, donde se encuentra en marcha un proceso de consulta para alcanzar la independencia.

Los resultados muestran que las distintas generaciones de descendientes han experimentado relaciones de diverso tipo con sus orígenes mediterráneos y con el sitio de su asentamiento a 20.000 km de distancia en el Océano Pacífico. Si bien la primera generación vivió y se mezcló con los argelinos deportados, no lo hizo en términos culturales, las siguientes generaciones se encontraron ante un período de silencio y tabú de los orígenes, lo que les hizo difícil rastrear su historia familiar. A finales del siglo XX, la apertura de archivos históricos, el desarrollo de las tecnologías de la comunicación y la situación política de Nueva Caledonia (proceso de independencia en consulta actual) abrieron el camino a un proceso de reapropiación de la identidad.

Nuestro artículo se propone destacar el impacto actual de este exilio forzoso sobre los descendientes de argelinos, tanto en Nueva Caledonia como en el área mediterránea, considerando el modo en que este hecho histórico es abordado tanto por Francia como por Argelia en la época contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Exilio, identidad, interculturación, Argelia, Nueva Caledonia.

Dal mar Mediterraneo all'oceano Pacifico, l'esilio dei prigionieri algerini nella colonia penale della Nuova Caledonia. Un'analisi dei processi identitari dei loro discendenti.

Sinossi

L'articolo prende in esame l'esperienza dell'esilio attraverso il caso dei discendenti algerini in Nuova Caledonia. I primi algerini arrivati nel territorio nei secoli XIX e XX erano condannati dall'amministrazione coloniale francese a scontare la pena in Nuova Caledonia. Molti di loro non poterono mai tornare nel Paese di origine.

La nostra ricerca qualitativa, basata su interviste semi-strutturate a nove dei loro discendenti, consente di analizzare come i discendenti dei deportati definiscono se stessi nell'attuale situazione politica della Nuova Caledonia, dove è in corso un processo di consultazione per l'indipendenza.

I risultati mostrano che le varie generazioni dei discendenti hanno rapporti diversi con la loro origine mediterranea e il loro insediamento a 20.000 chilometri di distanza nel Pacifico. Mentre la prima generazione viveva e si mescolava con i deportati algerini ma non con il contesto culturale circostante, le generazioni successive hanno sperimentato una fase di silenzio e tabù sulle origini che ha reso loro difficile tracciare la storia familiare. Dalla fine del Novecento, l'apertura degli archivi, lo sviluppo delle tecnologie di comunicazione e la nuova situazione politica della Nuova Caledonia (processo di indipendenza attualmente in corso) ha aperto la strada alla riappropriazione dell'identità.

Il nostro articolo evidenzia l'impatto dell'esilio forzato sui discendenti algerini in Nuova Caledonia, ma anche come questa esperienza è vissuta nell'area mediterranea in Francia e Algeria.

Parole chiave: Esilio, Identità, Intercultura, Algeria, Nuova Caledonia.

*From the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean,
the exile of Algerian prisoners
in the penal colony of New Caledonia.
An analysis of their descendants' identity processes*

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Introduction

New Caledonia, a French former colony located in the southwest Pacific Ocean, is engaged in a self-determination process as planned in the Noumea agreement signed in 1998. As part of this process, a referendum protocol was defined to enable Caledonians to decide whether their territory would access full sovereignty and become independent. This protocol, which is now over, allowed three consultation votes that took place in 2018, 2020 and 2021. Caledonians massively participated to the first two consultation votes (respectively 81% and 86%) and the results gave a light majority against independence (respectively 56% and 53%). The third consultation vote, organized on 12 December 2021, was singular as the participation rate was low (44%) after independence supporters called for a boycott. This last consultation vote then gave a large majority against independence (96%). As the Noumea agreement ended with this last consultation vote, New Caledonia now enters a transition period of 18 months during which the French government and the Caledonian actors will work on a new status for the archipelago. This status will be subject to a new consultation before June 2023.

Caledonians are therefore facing the challenge to mutually recognize themselves through a common history as a basis for a shared future project. This implies an effort to formulate a collective identity through: “a New Caledonian citizenship transcending in a common destiny the ethnic divisions resulting from colonization” [Author’s translation] (Salaun and Vernaudo, 2009, p.63). As such, the independence referendum raised the matter of territorial membership and national identity. This is true for all communities living in New Caledonia and this article will focus on the case of Algerian descendants who still live there (children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren). Indeed, between 1864 and 1897, 1.822 North Africans, mostly Algerians, were condemned to forced labor and had to serve their sentences in New Caledonia, which was then used by France as a penal colony. They settled there after their detention on rural concessions provided by the French administration (Barbançon, 2013).

Our analysis, as part of a qualitative set of researches in intercultural psychology (Oulahal, 2019, 2021; Oulahal & Denoux, 2018, 2020; Oulahal, Denoux & Teyssier, 2018; Oulahal, Denoux, Teyssier & Maillet, 2018; Oulahal & Malbert, 2021; Oulahal, Teyssier, Sturm & Denoux, 2021; Hmana, Oulahal, Soto Galindo & Denoux, 2020), is based on interviews carried out with nine Algerian descendants in New Caledonia. We investigated identity changes the territory’s current political context may cause for these descendants. The referendum process, the release from the taboo of the origins (Barbançon, 1992, 2003) and the identification of family ties in Algeria do produce a collective memory and a possible diaspora emergence among Algerian descendants in New Caledonia. Results show that the various generations of descendants experience different relations with their Mediterranean origins and their settlement 20.000 km away in the Pacific Ocean.

1. Between exile and occupation: a singular New Caledonian society

When it was taken over by France in 1853, New Caledonia was an archipelago populated by indigenous tribes of Melanesian origin: the

Kanaks. France set up an immigration policy, chosen for some and forced for others as condemned to serve prison sentences there:

Like Algeria and despite its remoteness from the imperial metropolis, but also its relatively narrow island character, it was thought from the 1860s as a land of welcome for a French population who was however reluctant to migration. Like Guyana, it became, during the same 1860s, a prison land promised to a future that was however more cheerful because it would not present the dangers of an equatorial climate, fauna and flora. The Caledonian land, by the mildness of its climate and its nature as well as by its healthiness, was to offer the condemned a peasant future as a basis to their rehabilitation. It was also to offer emigrants the hope of a better life, symbol of a powerful and generous colonial France. The Caledonian prison, far from being reduced to a strict repressive penitentiary institution as in Guyana, was in reality at the origin of a real population dynamic. It supported, in fact, an ambitious colonial project at the crossroads between a so-called penal colonization promising a future to the condemned and a so-called free colonization offering the most precious good of this time to proletarians and modest classes: the land and the property of the ground [Author's translation] (Merle, 2013, pp. 50-51).

In this colonial project, France dispossessed the Melanesian population of its land, offering agricultural concessions to migrants and former convicts. Kanaks were confined into reservations and were subjected to the *code de l'indigénat*, a specific legal code for natives in French colonies. At the end of the Second World War, New Caledonia changed status and, from a colony, became a French overseas territory. The Kanaks were freed from reservations and were no longer subjected to the *code de l'indigénat*: they then became French citizens. Between 1984 and 1988, an independence claim strengthened with violence and raised the issue of New Caledonia's relationship with France. The Matignon-Oudinot agreement in 1988, and later the Noumea agreement in 1998, put New Caledonia in a self-determination process (Faugere and Merle, 2010) along with a progressive and irreversible transfer of State powers to the local executive institutions and the definition of a "New Caledonian citizenship" (Faberon, 2002). New Caledonia once again changed status and, from an overseas territory, is currently a *sui generis* (of its own kind) community because of its advanced autonomous status (Joissains, Sueur and Tasca, 2014).

The Noumea agreement (1998) highlighted the dual legitimacy of the Kanak and the non-Kanak communities. It also put forward the

common destiny concept as a will to build a multi-ethnic community of destiny in New Caledonia. A translation of its introduction points is provided below:

- *Grande Terre* [Main Land] and the Islands were inhabited by men and women who were referred to as Kanaks. They had developed their own civilization, with its traditions, its languages and customs, which organized the social and political life.
- Men and women came in large numbers in New Caledonia during the 19th and 20th centuries, either convinced to bring progress, driven by their religious faith, brought against their will or seeking a second chance. They settled down in New Caledonia.
- Colonization has withdrawn dignity of the Kanak people and deprived it of its identity. Men and women lost their lives or their reasons for living in such situation. Great suffering resulted. It is important to remember these difficult moments, to recognize the faults, to restore to the Kanak people their confiscated identity, which for them is equivalent to recognition of their sovereignty, prior to the foundation of a new sovereignty shared in a common destiny.
- Today it is necessary to lay foundations for a New Caledonia's citizenship, allowing the native people to constitute with men and women living there a human community sharing a common destiny.

New Caledonia appears as a very singular society considering both its colonial and exile history, linking plural communities from the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. New Caledonia had 271.407 inhabitants at the time of the last population census in 2019. This census allowed participants to specify their felt belonging community in a proposed list. 41,2% of the population said they belonged to the Kanak community, 24,1% to the European community, the rest being formed by Wallisians and Futunians (8,3%) and other communities (7,6% Tahitians, Indonesians, Ni-Vanuatu, Vietnamese and other populations). 11,3% of those questioned indicated belonging to several communities. Last, 7,5% did not answer the question (data from the New Caledonia Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies).

In this multi-ethnic configuration, an identity questioning is currently brought forward both at the individual and collective level. Geneviève Vinsonneau (2002) defines identity as:

An evolutionary dynamic, by which the social actor, individual or collective, gives meaning to his being; it does so by linking, through the past, the present and the

future, elements about him and which may be related to social prescriptions, projects as well as concrete realities [Author's translation].

This definition is interesting with respect to the current situation in New Caledonia as its past, long obscured, is now put forward. However, the ethnic diversity and colonial history resulted in a society where cohabitation of its inhabitants has not translated so far into a common destiny (Salaun and Vernaudon 2009). A Senate committee, present in New Caledonia in 2010, observed, “[a] rapidly changing territory and a population involved in a crucial questioning about its identity and its future” [Author's translation] (Cointat and Frimat, 2011).

2. The forced exile of Algerian detainees in New Caledonia

The Algerian detainees deported to New Caledonia in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century mainly consisted of convicts, but also included 121 political prisoners and 163 repeat offenders relegated (Barbançon and Sand, 2013). At the end of their sentences, those who could not return to Algeria settled in the territory, sometimes with agricultural land provided by the colonial administration, particularly in the city of Bourail located at the center of the main island.

It is a peculiarity of the first Algerians in New Caledonia that they had a dual relation with the native Melanesian community. Indeed, they shared with the latter a common history of fighting the French colonization in their home country but, at the same time, they had to contribute themselves to New Caledonia's colonization. By siding France in this colonial project, they could expect recognition by the French administration and then get reduced sentences or agricultural lands to make a living. In 2011, in the Paris Arab World Institute, during the opening ceremony of the *Caledoun* exhibition, which retraced the route of Algerian detainees and their descendants in New Caledonia, Mr. Jean-Pierre Taïeb Aïfa, then chairman of the exhibition's steering committee and mayor of the city of Bourail, reminded:

Our fathers, exiled from their lands often given to settlers, became concessionaires on lands taken from Kanak tribes. For them, history has been reversed: the colonization they suffered in Algeria, it was their turn, often in spite of themselves, to become its actors, not to live on it, but to survive [Author's translation] (Barbançon and Sand, 2013, p.7).

Some Algerian detainees participated in the suppression of the great uprising of the Ataï chief in 1878 (Barbançon and Sand, 2013, p. 17). It will also be an Algerian detainee, Mohamed ben Ahmed, who will kill, on 10 January 1918, “the Kanak leader Bwëé Noël Pwatiba, heroic figure of the Kanak insurgency that broke out in 1917, in northern Caledonia” [Author's translation] (Merle and Muckle, 2017, p. 9). The fascinating research work carried out by Isabelle Merle and Adrian Muckle, with an analysis perspective based on the colonial history of subalterns, “humblest actors in imperial spaces”, retraced the course of this prisoner. This historical analysis thus highlights this contradiction Algerian detainees symbolize in the singular New Caledonian context, being at the same time victims and actors within the French colonial project.

It is again this special relationship that Louis-Jose Barbançon describes when he finishes his speech during the *25 years of the Matignon agreement - 15 years of the Noumea agreement* event. The author indicates that he had gone to Algiers (Algeria) a few weeks earlier “at the invitation of the Algerian Government as part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Algeria's independence” along with an official delegation from the Government of New Caledonia, led by Ms Dewe Gorodey, including “the descendants of Algerians convicted and transported to New Caledonia in the late 19th century and the customary representatives of the Melanesian Ajie Arhu area” [Author's translation] (Barbançon, 2013). The historian then reminds:

Knowing that these customary representatives are descendants of Kanak tribes that were destroyed or dispersed after the 1878 Ataï insurgence and that it is on their ravaged mounds and plundered land in the region of Bourail that the colonial administration installed the ancestors of these same Algerians, we can measure the distance performed and the efforts made by each others [Author's translation] (Barbançon, 2013).

3. The Algerian descendants in New Caledonia: identity processes between filiation and affiliation, between the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean

Our analysis is based on the findings from an intercultural psychology research where we had the opportunity to travel to New Caledonia for fifteen days to conduct research interviews in Noumea and Bourail with nine Algerian descendants: two women and seven men. It was our first stay in New Caledonia.

Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews based on the following subjects: origins, cultural background, representations of New Caledonia today, transmission to new generations and future projects. With participants' agreement, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Confidentiality and anonymity to which we committed ourselves prevent us to indicate identity of our participants or even propose in this article interviews' extracts that could enable their recognition. However, we will provide readers with contextual data for a better understanding of our discussion. Interviews were performed in French and we translated extracts provided in this article.

3.1. The Algerian detainees' children

Two participants, aged between 80 and 90 years old, are themselves children of Algerian prisoners and grew in direct contact with the first Algerians of New Caledonia. Their interviews are full of historical facts related to some events such as the celebrations at the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan that the Algerians observed:

It was pretty. So, they fired guns, they had fun, they ran on horseback, they did the *Fantasia* [a traditional cavalry show in North Africa], they did everything. That, I remember, was the end of the *Carême* festival [*Carême* relates to the Christian fasting period which name is used by these descendants to refer to the Muslim fasting month], [...] we experienced the Arab world well (Interview extract).

They remember their fathers' homeland nostalgia and resignation facing the impossible return: "My father, he wanted to go back to Algeria, and then... he couldn't (Interview extract)". These participants also evoke the progressive disappearance of the first

Algerians: “Slowly, there was nobody. We saw people die. I remember when my father went to the funerals” (Interview extract).

These participants’ discourse also describes difficult living conditions: “The childhood was hard at first because parents were poor” (Interview extract).

They also provide information about racism that children were then facing: “We were children of convicts... We went to public schools. We couldn't remain in public schools because we were called “dirty *bicot*” [pejorative French term referring to North Africans]” (Interview extract).

These participants also mention the obligation their parents had to give their children Catholic names so that they could access schools: “These are first names that were given... when you wanted to go to school, you had to have a Christian first name and then be baptized” (Interview extract).

This group of older descendants, children of forced exiled Algerian detainees, all share the fact they had an Algerian father and a non-Algerian mother. Indeed, Algerian detainees being exclusively men, they could only marry women from other communities living in New Caledonia. Mothers could be from European, Melanesian or Asian origins. The discourses highlight some kind of isolation first Algerians experienced in their role as fathers, making it difficult, if not impossible, to transmit cultural values and practices to their children, whether it be in terms of language, religion or any other perspective. The first Algerians were exclusively males and it appears they limited interactions and transmissions to their children, letting these latter socialize and integrate cultural values within their mothers’ family environment. For this first generation of Algerian children born in New Caledonia, the Mediterranean filiation would give way to new Pacific affiliations... the Mediterranean heritage would give way to a Pacific future...

3.2 The Algerian detainees’ eldest grand-children

Two participants, aged between 60 and 70 years old and who are grandsons of the first Algerians, express their attachment to their Algerian origins while highlighting silence and taboo that surrounded them: “I just know that my grandfather came here, well let's say to

the penal colony... And then... he started a family anyway and then I'm here today” (Interview extract).

These participants’ discourses allow us to understand how a community, designated in New Caledonia by the qualifier Arabs, began to structure in the territory with marriages between Algerian descendants. The term Arabs was first used by the French colonial and prison administration to designate North African convicts, mainly Algerians as indicated above. This is the name their descendants chose to use to refer to themselves to highlight their origins, for example when they created the Arabs and Arabs’ friends association in New Caledonia in 1969 after the death of the last Algerian detainee. Today, the term Arabs remains widely used by the descendants themselves and within the information media but other names exist, such as Algerians, Berbers or Kabyles of New Caledonia.

These participants also evoke racism they suffered as children: “I was a little *bicot*... you know... it was a way of saying, Arab, they would not say Arab, they would say *bicot*” (Interview extract).

These participants also mention consequences of Algeria’s independence during their youth as many French settlers and military in Algeria then came to settle in New Caledonia:

It was the end of the Algeria war. I happened to be with army officers who just came from Algeria and who said “Well then! We left Algeria and we still find these...”, you see, these ‘*bougnouls*’ [another pejorative French term referring to Africans] or so... I don’t know what they called me with (Interview extract).

For the first two generations of Algerian descendants, Algeria’s independence gave a particular twist to their life experience in New Caledonia with a commitment to recognition of their history, perhaps thus opening the way to a structuration of an Arab community.

3.3 *The Algerian detainees’ youngest grand-children*

Three other participants, aged between 45 and 60 years old and also grandchildren of the first Algerians, mention likewise in their interviews the lack of transmission due to the taboo of the origins: “I knew my grandfather was born in Algeria, but that's it” (Interview extract).

However, access to archival documents enabled them to move a step forward: “We are all, our generation, either already having a

good knowledge of our origins, or in the process of discovering our origins, [...] the generation before, it was the generation of the unspoken” (Interview extract).

For these participants, it is above all a matter of understanding their ancestors’ history: “I had the feeling that it was somehow going to close the loop. Here it is, to assume this part of history that our ancestors tried so hard to erase” (Interview extract).

These participants, who were then teenagers or young adults during the tragic independence claims in New Caledonia that led to armed conflicts and bloodshed between 1984 and 1988, strongly focus on the issue of “living together”. They feel themselves first and above all as Caledonians and wish to be part of a Neo-Caledonian identity they think they always had: “I still feel very Caledonian, I will always be Caledonian” (Interview extract).

A participant indicates: “My feeling is that I'm here, deeply here. I'm going to say the only place in the world where I'm truly legitimate is here” (Interview extract).

For this generation, though the Algerian origins get a symbolic importance, with for example the need to “connect with the language”, they put forward the fact that their daily reality remains anchored in New Caledonia.

The transmission of an individual and a collective history is present:

I think it's important to create landmarks, anchor points for... precisely... for those who come today [...] What we have been taught now, what we have learned and that we will be able to transmit orally to our children as well (Interview extract).

These participants are facing an issue on what to transmit to the younger generation, between a need to keep track of history and a necessity to forget a traumatic past:

Today, I belong to the Arab community in New Caledonia. For me, it's clear, that's it. And my children are completely different [...] and they have not... they don't attach themselves to anything, anything. For them they are Caledonians... but they are still young. Me, at their age, I was the same, I didn't feel the need to know where I came from. For me, I was a Caledonian (Interview extract).

From a need to build knowledge to keep a link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, these Algerian

descendants question the possibility to navigate between two seas. They sometimes may think it would be easier to let their children serenely immerse into the Pacific Ocean, as their ancestors may have done when they let their children attach to their mothers' communities instead of transmitting any Algerian cultural background.

Indeed, the relationship with Algeria raises question when it comes to children:

They are curious. They are curious to go but they do not want to go, if you understand the difference. I don't want to force them, it will come at a time, it will come. I will keep the links that we have been able to recreate with the family [...] But the younger generation, for the moment, is not showing any particular interest. However, in the older ones of that generation [...], when they discovered the exhibition [Caledoun], they were very moved, very moved and very proud to know that they belonged to this community. But there is no particular desire to go to Algeria, to see, smell, touch the country. There was a lot of emotion [during the Caledoun exhibition]. Because we [...] have had bits of history, on poverty, misery, and so on... But we have not yet transmitted that to our children. [During the exhibition] The children, they saw the pictures, they saw the photos, they read the texts. They were affected (Interview extract).

3.4 The Algerian detainees' great-grand-children

Finally, two participants, aged between 30 and 40 years old and great-grandsons of the first Algerians, also indicate the lack of transmission as to their origins while having benefited from an easier access to information through the research works of historians, archives, Internet and trips to Algeria: "Me, when I was a kid, I didn't know I was Algerian. When you're a kid, you don't know [...] Afterwards, the Algerian TV came, there were a lot of documentaries" (Interview extract).

Their stories highlight a search for truth: "What binds us to our ancestors today, that's it. It is always to publicize why they came, why they came here" (Interview extract).

It is with this younger generation that the will to rehabilitate ancestors seems to be most invoked: "Their story... how they got here... the sufferings they had [...] this is what we inherited actually... That's all this history of sufferings, and... that they should not have been condemned" (Interview extract).

In addition, these youngest descendants show a particular attachment to the religious dimension, the return to the Muslim religion of their ancestors allowing them to make a new link with Algeria: “Religion, it came like that. I did not know what was that, before, the Muslim religion, [...] and little by little, well here I am back in the religion” (Interview extract).

For the Algerian descendants in New Caledonia, more particularly in the city of Bourail, this religious link materializes with the construction, in 1998, of a mosque in Nessadiou, one of Bourail city’s districts. Religion also allows a proximity to the Muslim community worldwide: “There are also people from abroad who began to come... we then learned a few things about religion” (Interview extract).

For the last two generations of Algerian descendants, discourses provide less historical facts and mainly reflect the need to build oneself in a plurality of cultural affiliations, a symbolic Algerian affiliation being part of them, but especially to be recognized in a neo-Caledonian identity that would bring together all the communities living in the territory.

4. Discussion. Exile from the Mediterranean Sea and interculturalisation in the Pacific Ocean: a basis of the New Caledonia society

If we consider the interculturalisation concept as a set of paradoxical processes referring to the integration of a plurality of cultural references (Clanet, 1990; Guerraoui, 2009, 2011), New Caledonia is a unique place (Oulahal, Guerraoui & Denoux, 2018). These processes are said to be paradoxical because they involve at the same time transformation and maintenance, closure and opening to the various cultural backgrounds in a given time and space. In the intercultural psychology perspective, interculturalisation therefore consists of a set of identity processes developed by individuals to overcome tensions and cultural differences in an intercultural situation. And this is precisely where we believe New Caledonia is currently because, for all of its citizens, beyond a common identity, the main matter is to make emerge a unique and original neo-

Caledonian cultural background that would transcend the various cultures of the territory.

As we presented above, the Kanak people represent the native community in New Caledonia while other communities were exiled there from France and its colonies or came as foreign workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Communities share a taboo of the origins, which make it more difficult to build a common future project. Between those whose ancestors experienced forced exile and prison, those whose ancestors came freely hoping to provide a better life for their family and those whose ancestors were deprived from their land, the future of New Caledonia is still very unclear.

Though those who were exiled in New Caledonia wished, at their time, to get back to their home countries and families, they were forced to settle there and some got children and raised families. A few generations later, the homeland return wish has vanished and gave room to a fear of being forced to leave New Caledonia in case independence was approved. This would have been a second exile for representatives of these communities. The three self-determination referendums organized in 2018, 2020 and 2021 finally gave a majority against independence. But the reality is such that almost one out of two Caledonians wanted to become independent from France while the other one wanted to remain within the French perimeter. As we indicated previously, New Caledonia now enters a transition period of 18 months to define its new status that will be submitted to a new consultation by June 2023. At this stage, the New Caledonia face for the coming years is still to be discovered.

Our research highlighted an intercultural process among the Algerian descendants in New Caledonia, the current territory's political context reactivating an attachment to Algeria perceived as the land of origin. An intercultural identity could emerge from a root identity demonstrating a filiation and a New Caledonian identity under process. Thus, between filiation and affiliation, our participants call themselves Caledonians while remaining of Algerian origin: "After all, we, we are Caledonians. Me, I was born in Caledonia. But I am an Algerian descendant. Which makes me, honestly, feel Algerian" (Interview extract).

The rhizomatic identity (Glissant, 1996) is helpful to better understand the current situation of Algerian descendants in New Caledonia. Edouard Glissant proposed this rich and enlightening comprehension of intercultural identities through his concept of rhizomatic structures that can be relied on to better understand the current identity processes for Algerian descendants and more generally for all individuals in New Caledonia. The Algerian descendants indeed often put forward their cultural plurality when facing current strong community movements in New Caledonia. If we consider the communities proposed in the 2019 census (as presented above), we can rapidly notice that the Algerian descendants may not easily fit into the main cultural groups. They are facing a current reality as their claimed identity (intercultural identity) has to make its way within the various prescribed identities (cultural identities). They feel as if they were asked to side a community because of the growing communitarianism within the territory. All being descendants of Algerian men who had children with non-Algerian women, interculturalization is at the basis of their identity processes. Though their specificity is not fully recognized today, we think these descendants' origins allow them to fully fit into a New Caledonian identity to be built for the entire population of New Caledonia.

Algerian descendants could appear as a first instance of this new Neo-Caledonian identity, a rhizomatic identity, hybrid, multi-rooted, as proposed by Edouard Glissant. Such identity, which emerges with relationships between individuals from various cultural backgrounds, is constructed in the present and its result can't be predicted. Glissant thus proposes a significant change from the traditional filiation ideals. For the author, identity is no longer perceived as a single tree but as a proliferating plant, without a beginning or an end (Clarke, 2000). Glissant considers individuals' various cultural identities to highlight the complexity of the *creole* identity, which is formed when roots and origins meet and share cultural bounds. We could thus speak of a rhizomatic identity in New Caledonia that would emerge from the encounter of the various cultural groups. Such identity would emphasize the need to link communities together instead of keeping them distant from another as this can

appear in the population census and the current communitarianism induced by the referendum process.

The Algerian descendants in New Caledonia reflect this intercultural process and rhizomatic identity, which can sometimes also be noticed at the institutional level such as in Bourail city's coat of arms. Bourail city hosted the majority of lands given by the French colonial administration to Algerian detainees and its coat of arms articulates these affiliations (figure 1): “[It] bears witness to the ancestral Kanak presence through its two door frames. The crescent moon explains the origin of the first occupants of Bourail. These were the freed Algerian convicts” (Ouenoughi, 2005, p.79). Other elements represent the New Zealand cemetery (blue cross), the Moluccas blackbird introduced in New Caledonia from Bourail city (bird with yellow legs) and the Bourail agricultural communities (cattle head and wheat sheaf).

Fig. 1. The coat of arms of Bourail city



The Algerian descendants in New Caledonia also mix various cultural backgrounds in their daily life and thoughts: “My two grandfathers were Muslims. And my two grandmothers, they were Catholics... finally, if I respect my two grandfathers and my two grandmothers, well, I take a little of both” (Interview extract).

A participant, referring to his burial, indicated his will to be buried: “In the European way [...] for example, what we always do, is to put a crescent moon or a star on the grave, you see, to show that this is a Muslim, we are Muslims. And me, I’ll get it on the grave” (Interview extract).

Another participant told us: “I fast during Ramadan but I'm Catholic, [...] so my way to consider the space, the world, the

people around me and questions of faith, are also imbued with the diversity of my roots” (Interview extract).

For these participants, the religious dimension enables them a link between their plural cultural affiliations. For others, it is through an identity discourse that intercultural creations are demonstrated: “I am an Algerian born in New Caledonia with a French citizenship, so if there is independence, I will be an Algerian born in New Caledonia with a New Caledonian citizenship” (Interview extract).

The discovery of their origins allows these descendants to become fully involved in New Caledonia’s history. It is by claiming and being attached to a community who was forced exiled in New Caledonia that they can get recognized as part of the New Caledonia community. A participant indicates: “Now, we can’t leave from here” (Interview extract).

Another participant specifies that this knowledge brings him: “A peace of mind, that is to say, to have rehabilitated the memory of ancestors without history and somehow without legitimacy in this country” (Interview extract).

In the current New Caledonia’s political context, a root planted within the Caledonian soil would legitimize the presence of these descendants: “Because the common destiny is to recognize to all the people who arrived in Caledonia, who built the country, the right to stay, the right to live in mutual respect of origins and each other’s cultures” (Interview extract).

One participant said he wanted to: “Remind our Kanak cousins that the history of this country, over the last 160 years, as developed by the anti-colonial discourse, is a manipulated discourse, as was the colonial discourse, and that the reality is in between. That builds legitimacy” (Interview extract).

We believe this context could be at the origin of a diaspora emergence: “Here, for the past twenty years or so, we’ve been talking a lot about Kanak culture, highlighting Melanesian culture. So, we realized that people had customs, that there were customs. So, you tell yourself, and me... what is it?” (Interview extract).

The Algerian descendants would thus claim exile as a basis of their history in New Caledonia and merge as a diaspora to link to the past and to legitimize their current presence on the Caledonian soil. The arrival of the first Algerians in New Caledonia raised the question

of identity changes they were able to implement in their forced exile experience. The diasporic identity concept makes it possible to understand the way their descendants can define themselves both as being from here and elsewhere (Eckmann, 2008, p. 18). The first Algerians were taken from their Mediterranean environment and arrived in New Caledonia as inmates. They served their sentences, they then got married and raised family there. However, it does not seem that they wanted to perpetuate Algerian traditions in New Caledonia. They transmitted only very little of their history to their children, the geographical distance from their home country maybe justifying this choice: to let the children follow their mothers whose communities were better represented. The first Algerians therefore continued to live and practice some traditions without however involving their children. For example, only the first Algerians really spoke Arabic or Berber. Likewise, religious practice was not really subject to any formal transmission:

When they used to fast ... so in the evening ... they had to eat at night, I do not know what time ... I know mom, my aunt and my grandmother would cook, and then they would eat during the night. And then the next day, we wouldn't see them because they would go to their own business (Interview extract).

Conclusion

This research work was an opportunity to meet the Algerian descendants in New Caledonia. The various interviewed groups and generations of descendants showed different ways to relate to their origins from the Mediterranean Sea and identities in the Pacific Ocean. But it was also an opportunity to think about the future of a country for which exile and colonization are two main characteristics, strongly inscribed in a plurality of communities living in the territory. More than 160 years later, the question still remains. And the current self-determination process just highlights how fragile balance can be in such environments. As we said earlier, the way New Caledonia will move on in the coming months and years is still to be discovered.

One participant of our research said: “My children are, I think, the image of all the opportunities New Caledonia can offer and all the diversity it can generate” [Author’s translation] (Interview extract).

The knowledge of the origins can connect these descendants to Algeria, the country of their ancestors, but can also fully inscribe them in New Caledonia, the country where their ancestors were exiled then forced to stay and where they are now buried.

We propose the hypothesis that a contemporary diaspora emerges for these Algerian descendants and the diasporic cycle would just begin. Commemorative sites and monuments are identified in New Caledonia (cemetery, mosque...) as an identity memory vector on the places of exile of their ancestors. Diasporas are fluctuant, they appear, develop, die out and can sometimes even remain only in the draft state. Our analysis of the Algerian descendants identity in New Caledonia being investigated in the territory’s self-determination process, a new evaluation of such diasporic phenomenon should be thought about in a later temporality.

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