

Kanak Culture of New Caledonia

The influence of Déwé Gorodey on Kanak women

Introduction

This study focuses on New Caledonia poet, Déwé Gorodey (or Gorodé), and her writings. New Caledonia, a territory of France, is an island in the Pacific Ocean. The island was colonized in the mid-1800s, affecting the Melanesian natives. The natives are more commonly known as Kanaks and have seen years of repression under the French regime. Because of government intervention, most of the Kanak “coutume” (custom in French) has been limited. The *coutume* is an almost intangible presence of Kanaky culture, affecting their everyday life and decision.

Déwé Gorodey was a prominent political figure during years of unrest. Most of her writings concerned themes surrounding the *coutume*; land ownership, women’s stewardship, and other expectations. Having a connection with the Gorodey family while living in New Caledonia, I was able to interview them about Déwé and her influence.

Method

Oral history: Interview via messaging with family members

Textual analysis: Gorodey's *Sharing as Custom Provides* and *The Kanak Apple Season*

General Research: Melanesian island culture and history

Personal experiences: Living in Nouméa and other southern cities in New Caledonia

Results

The *coutume* has high demands, but Gorodey's writings created a space for these women to be themselves and work on themselves. To her, women don't have to live the *coutume* at their personal expense. She helped them find greater equality because she shows that Kanak women can improve themselves, but also still be a part of their family and tribe.

Poster resources

Gorodé, D. (2004). *Sharing As Custom Provides*. Pandanus Books.

Gorodé, D. (2004). *The Kanak Apple Season*. Pandanus Books.

Gorodey, C. (2021, October 5). Interview about Déwé. (T. T. Blackham, Interviewer)

Stefanson, B. (1998). *Entretien avec Déwé Gorodé*. Notre librairie, 70-90.

The struggles, history, and writings of Déwé Gorodey encapsulate the experiences of the modern Kanak women with the *coutume* and colonial repression.



"Throughout Déwé Gorodé’s works...characters, particularly women, often decide to live out their individual point of view in the complex hierarchical space of kinship networks and colonial impositions." –Peter Brown

Independence is	sharing as custom prescribes
a bit of garden bit of field a patch of dirt patch of land	giving to others fighting her own desires
land to work	in the face of silence of violence of inaction of apathy and state dependence in the face of oneness of thought
like the woman tending her children her taro her yam day in day out fishing night or day both lagoon fish mangrove crab	doing speaking living in the everyday
whether to feed the extended family or for market day	our aspirations of being together
whether working at her own pace or at the set hour in her rights and responsibilities for the child to come or the child at school	a free country a sovereign nation a people who share
	- "independence" 1997

"These voices of the earth, so my grandmother Utê Mûrûnû taught me, were none other than those of a mother, of a woman. And they spoke first and foremost to us women who, better than anyone, could understand them. Bearers of seed, we were burdened with proscriptions, branded by taboos that were like so many rocks put in the way of our lives. As the habitual paths of pleasure, we became Eves bitten by the snake invented by the priests of the new religion. As Adi, black pearls of customary marriage, we were exchanged like so many pieces of pottery sealing an alliance in between two wars. Treated as ways and byways between clans, we survived as best we could our childhood and puberty, too often raped by lecherous old men. Prestige, virility, warfare – male concepts for the great hut of men built on the broad backs of women! Sharing, solidarity, humility – women's words conceived, nourished and borne in the entrails of us beaten women! ... You already know it, little sister, this world erected on our womb, our arms, our head, this universe living like a parasite off our body, is nothing but a trap, forcing us into submission...And if we didn't ask to come into the world, if we didn't choose to be born women, we have only one life, here and now, so let's try at least to like it instead of suffering it!"

-Excerpt from "Utê Mûrûnû"