

Book Reviews

Hamid Mokaddem, *Yeiwene Yeiwene : construction et révolution de Kanaky (Nouvelle-Calédonie)*, Nouvelle-Calédonie, Expressions; Marseille, La courte échelle/Éditions Transit, November 2017, 87 pp., rrp € 10,00, ISBN 978-2-91727-017-2.

Hamid Mokaddem's latest book, *Yeiwene Yeiwene : construction et révolution de Kanaky (Nouvelle-Calédonie)*, focuses on the personal journey of a key Kanak political figure, Yeiwene Yeiwene (1945–1989). Yeiwene Yeiwene was from Nengone (Maré island) and played a crucial part first in the struggle for Kanak emancipation, and then in the fight for sovereignty and independence, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s.

In his book, Mokaddem details Yeiwene Yeiwene's political journey from his early involvement in the Red Scarves (les Foulards Rouges) during the late 1960s to his death at Iaai (Ouvéa island) in 1989. Over these two decades, Yeiwene Yeiwene held high positions within institutions and companies: President of the Loyalty Islands in 1985, CEO of Air Calédonie and Vice-President of the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS—*Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste*). Yet, Mokaddem presents Yeiwene Yeiwene first and foremost as a man of action, close to the people, a practical man who initiated change at ground level.

Yeiwene Yeiwene's first job was at the post office. He was imprisoned in 1969 for translating into Nengone a political pamphlet that denounced racism and segregation, and for circulating it. His values and commitment to Kanak liberation were reflected in his work, even if that meant risking his career and his life. On his release, he moved to Iaai (Ouvéa), where he created a mobile postal service to facilitate communication with the more remote tribes of the island. In Iaai, and in his subsequent positions elsewhere, he was attentive to the needs of the people. He was behind the implementation of an inter-islands ferry (41) and he put work and effort into facilitating and speeding up medical evacuations from the Loyalty Islands. Yeiwene Yeiwene strove to restore a certain political balance (through decentralisation and distribution of wealth)

between the clans and the regions, to create bonds and develop alliances with local people. Listening to the needs and aspirations of those at grassroots level and helping them get organised towards economic independence and political sovereignty were core to his actions. The breadth and significance of Yeiwene Yeiwene's actions described in the book debunk the myth of a political figure oft-presented as operating 'in the shadow of Jean-Marie Tjibaou' or simply as his 'lieutenant'. If anything, Yeiwene Yeiwene was 'the outrigger of the canoe' (55).

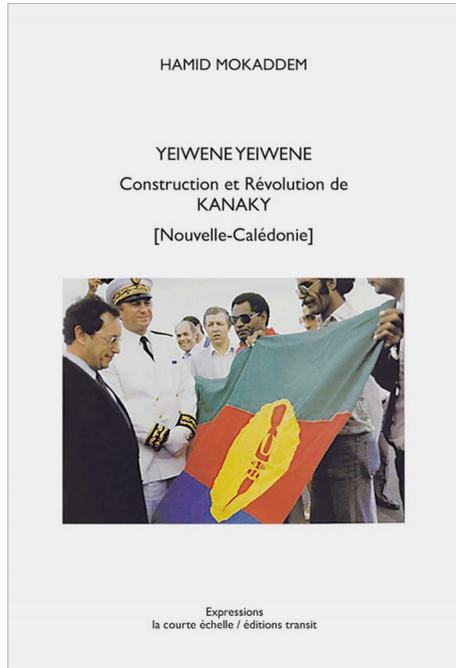
The book's three main aims are:

1. to demonstrate that Yeiwene Yeiwene was a key Kanak political figure, equally as important as Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Eloi Machoro for the pro-independence struggle in Kanaky in the 1970s and 1980s;
2. to encourage Kanak researchers and students to take Kanak history back into their hands, and free it from the shackles of the dominant, institutional, non-Kanak historical narrative that excludes any prospect of sovereignty—Hamid Mokaddem posits that institutional conservatism has served French interests and has excluded non-conformist scholars who are critical of colonialism (11), and that, therefore, 'writing, researching and clarifying provide ways of resisting new forms of recolonisation' (11);
3. to shed light on the future of the territory, which has been colonised since 1853.

He contrasts Yeiwene Yeiwene's political engagement with the period that followed and deplors that 'politically, New Caledonia has been marking time since 1988' (9). Thus, the book is much more than a long-due tribute to the life and work of Yeiwene Yeiwene. It provides valuable insights into the values, skills and forms of engagement required from political figures to contribute to a process of genuine emancipation and decolonisation. It encourages readers to ask themselves what sovereignty and independence mean in today's world.

Hamid Mokaddem plays with scale, zooming in and out, and interweaving Yeiwene Yeiwene's personal story with the national Kanak independence struggle and the history of the territory as a whole over the twenty-year period he examines (1969–1989). The fact that the narrative starts with micro-history (personal narratives and lived experiences) and broadens

to macro-history (the emergence of the Kanak independence movement and the French colonial conservatism it faced)—rather than the other way around—is a clever decolonial move. To achieve this, the author based his research on a dozen interviews conducted with people who personally knew Yeiwene Yeiwene, including family members, colleagues and fellow members of the FLNKS.

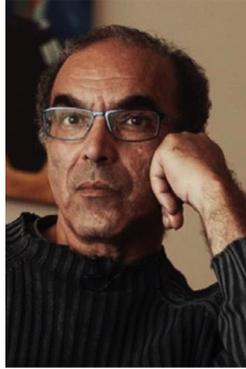


The narrative shows intellectual rigour. It is well-referenced and the argument Mokaddem develops is buttressed by a variety of historical sources such as written sources, radio, television programs, digital footage and literature. The book includes several photographs from the personal archive of the Yeiwene family and the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture (*Agence de développement de la culture kanak—ADCK*) displaying Yeiwene Yeiwene’s political engagement over the years. The author also includes two insightful and useful annexes at the end of the book: the transcription of the last interview with Yeiwene Yeiwene on Radio Lévê Doubout Matinik (RLDM), recorded a few hours before his assassination in Iaai in 1989,

and a concise chronology of the history of Kanaky, covering the period under analysis (1969–1989), which will be particularly useful to readers who are less familiar with the history of the territory and with the various milestones of the Kanak movement for emancipation and independence.

In the past, Hamid Mokaddem has been amongst the first, and the few, scholars to use the term ‘Kanak’ in their work *and* unpack its genealogy, its significance, and the importance of Kanak political discourses to non-Kanak readers. It is with this same intellectual verve that the chapter ‘Trajectoire nationale : révolution et évolution de Kanaky 1977–1989’ provides useful retrospectives and reflection on the scope and the meaning of the term, and the building of the sovereign and independent society it encompasses.

The book’s account of Yeiwene Yeiwene’s personal trajectory from his involvement in early activist groups to his entry into political institutions is insightful. Mokaddem demonstrates that his trajectory was not linear (from grassroots actions to the political elite) and that Yeiwene Yeiwene’s political engagement was anything but elitist. His engagement with, and concern for, grassroots action and people continued throughout his political journey. The way in which Yeiwene Yeiwene put sovereignty into practice and continuously combined grassroots engagement with managing institutions has universal value. For this very reason, the book has the potential to appeal to a large audience. It tells of a political actor who was first and foremost an activist, galvanising and organising grassroots movements and protests outside institutional frameworks. When working within institutions, he used them to Kanak people’s advantage in order to challenge colonial power and emancipate the Kanak people. Yeiwene Yeiwene’s strengths were that he understood and helped organise the struggle, both from within and beyond institutional sites. He was not only fighting against colonialism and injustice, but was also building the independent society he wanted to see emerge. His actions were not merely responding to a hostile and unjust context, but were also proactive and initiated changes. Hamid Mokaddem shows that Yeiwene Yeiwene’s capacity to listen to people’s aspirations went beyond mere strategic electoral calculation. In that respect, the book is an instructive and useful read even for those not familiar with the New Caledonian context, and is relevant for readers of French with an interest in Indigenous sovereignty and its implementation.



Hamid Mokaddem. Source: pacific-bookin.nc.

Hamid Mokaddem's book was published the year before the first referendum on independence held in November 2018. As the date of the second referendum (scheduled for 6 September 2020) gets closer, Mokaddem's book retains all its relevance, potency, and utility. The author touches on matters that will strike a chord with today's readers—even more so those familiar with the New Caledonian context. These matters are, for instance, the importance of political and customary alliances and interdependences, the consequences of misalliances, and the ways in which Kanak independence has been diluted through economic reforms (35). More importantly, the book reminds us that in a context of unwillingness and institutional conservatism, every step forward towards independence and decolonisation has necessitated decades-long struggles and has been made at a great cost for Kanak people (48). Freedom and dignity are never granted by the colonial power, but won by those who rise against it.

Mokaddem's book is relatively short (eighty-seven pages), but it is precisely in its brevity that lie its strength and purpose: to be accessible and appeal to a large audience. By the end, one is left wanting to learn more. The book is likely to pique readers' curiosity, stimulating interest, and hopefully will encourage further research on recent local history and reflection upon what it means to be sovereign and independent in the twenty-first century—and how this can be achieved.

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