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Environmental Violence and Crises of Legitimacy in New Caledonia

Leah S. Horowitz

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Sustainability Research Institute (SRI), School of Earth and Environment,
The University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)113 3436461
Fax: +44 (0)113 3436716

Email: SRI-papers@see.leeds.ac.uk
Web-site: http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/sri

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Email: leah@env.leeds.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of what hidden tensions shape environmental conflicts by investigating the responses of residents of villages near a mining project in New Caledonia to Rhéébù Nùù, an indigenous environmental protest group. An overlooked and yet crucial factor in local support for the protest group was a lack of faith in the government and, more fundamentally, in the democratic system through which representatives were elected; instead, villagers put their faith in a revitalization of customary authority. Thus, this environmental violence masked a crisis of political legitimacy, grounded in a history of opposition to the colonial power. However, not all community members felt that Rhéébù Nùù indeed had the support of customary authority, and many disagreed with the group's violent tactics. Thus, an examination of specific histories and cultural forms is necessary in order to understand people's choices about who best represents their interests and, thus, to whom they should give their support in instances of environmental conflict.

Key words: environment, micropolitics, mining, political ecology, social movement

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About the Author

Leah S. Horowitz is a Lecturer in Sustainable Development. Leah has conducted extensive fieldwork in New Caledonia over the past decade, including her doctoral research and subsequent, shorter studies, as well as consulting work for a mining company and for a provincial government office. She has used this data to publish on topics including local perceptions of environmental impacts of mining, micropolitical struggles catalysed by mining projects, and politico-economic implications of mining. She has also published articles based on other research, such as an analysis of the social dimensions of a protected area in Borneo.

1 Introduction

On the night of April 1, 2006, a group of indigenous Melanesians, armed with heavy chisel-ended iron bars, rocks and Molotov cocktails, illegally entered a mine site in New Caledonia where they seized vehicles and materials. Destroying equipment and infrastructure, they dug trenches and set up barriers made of cars and burning tires, blocking access to the site. The following morning, they were joined by 100 more activists as well as 200 gendarmes who released teargas on the activists and fired on a pick-up truck that was charging at them. Forty-eight hours later, four gendarmes had been injured, 16 people had been arrested, over one billion FCFP (approximately $US 13 million) of damage had been caused to the mining company's equipment, and activities at the site had been halted for two days (Ragaj et al. 2006; Lepot et al. 2006a, 2006b).

Many studies have examined relationships between natural resources and civil conflict. Authors within the "environmental security" school have investigated conditions of resource scarcity, defined as a dearth of (mainly renewable) resources driven, in large measure, by population growth (Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998: 1). They find that by "contributing to economic crisis", this scarcity can play a role in civil unrest or hostilities between nations (Homer-Dixon 1994: 26; see also Baechler 1998). The hostile activity conditioned by resource scarcity is often "chronic and diffuse subnational violence" (Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998: 15), the most difficult type for governments or the international community to suppress. Proponents of the "environmental security" school, such as Thomas Homer-Dixon, also recognize "intervening" (1991: 87) or "contextual" factors that influence the likelihood of violent responses to resource stress, and that "range from the nature of relations among ethnic groups to the state's degree of autonomy from outside pressure groups" (Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998: 9). Similarly, Günther Baecheler (1998) emphasizes that the "conflict potential" of environmental degradation is conditioned by "sociopolitical factors" such as the marginalization of social groups and unmet expectations for economic development, as well as ethnic tensions. He further notes that the likelihood of a resort to violence also depends on the perceived benefits and costs of this option as well as the capacities of both formal authorities and civil society to pursue peaceful options or mobilize a violent response (1998: 32). However, the theoretical conclusions derived from both the Environmental Change and Acute Conflict Project led by Homer-Dixon and the Environmental Conflicts Project led by Baecheler have been criticized (e.g. Hartmann 2001; Peluso and Watts 2001a) for, inter alia, failing to consider in adequate depth the dynamism and complexities of the politico-economic and socio-cultural conditions that contextualize environmental violence – in other words, its political ecology.

Others, within the "resource curse" school, argue instead that an abundance of high-value natural (mainly non-renewable) resources can result in conflict, through a variety of mechanisms. For one, natural resource wealth often leads to excessive dependence on primary commodities, which are subject to price shocks and thus lead to unstable economic growth, making the nation more vulnerable to civil conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2005). Meanwhile, the rents generated by the export of resources – especially oil – can lead to "greed-motivated" insurgencies whereby rebels seek to capture the wealth that these resources represent (Collier and Hoeffler 2004: 589). This income can also allow governments to have weaker state structures

and to be less accountable to their citizens (Karl 1997: 61), which may fuel discontent among the constituency. Scholars disagree, however, as to whether or when natural resources are in a causal relationship with civil conflict. Some have found that at low quantities they increase the risk of war while at high levels they actually decrease it (Collier and Hoeffler 1998), and others postulate that the "causal arrow" may run in the opposite direction, with civil war destroying the manufacturing sector and forcing countries to rely on natural resource exports (Ross 2004b: 338). Some authors even try to specify which – or disagree about whether – particular commodities are linked to the onset or duration of conflict (see Ross 2004a: 46). Even when accepting the results of studies that use statistical methods, however, some scholars discount the value of broad correlations that cannot elucidate the reasons behind the outbreak of violence in any particular instance and thus have limited policy value (Le Billon 2001; Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Di John 2007).

In other words, in lieu of a simple, linear, universal relationship between commodity and conflict, multiple, interlinked social variables regulate the formation and expression of responses to resource-related opportunities and constraints. These variables are particular to each location; thus, to understand them requires a close analysis of "site-specific" conditions "rooted in local histories and social relations" (Peluso and Watts 2001a: 5). A recognition of the importance of considering the role of local particularities in resource-related tensions has led some scholars to call for the abandonment of simplistic, deterministic cause-effect theories and to advocate "the case study and comparative political economy approach" in order to focus on "historically specific processes of conflict/cleavages in a given society" (see Peluso and Watts 2001b; Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Di John 2007: 980). Such an approach can allow insight into the multitude and diversity of forces that influence environmental conflicts, and thus can lead to the development of richer, more nuanced theories.

One area that remains "seriously under-theorized" is the study of "the ways that environmental violence reflects or masks other forms of social struggle" (Peluso and Watts 2001a: 6): the underlying or tangentially related tensions within societies that figure, often invisibly, in resource-related conflicts, modulating and shaping these (see Horowitz 2002; Turner 2004; Banks 2008). Moreover, the literature has paid insufficient attention to the variance of responses, within a single community (at a national, international or subnational level), to environmental violence. An investigation of why some people engage in or support violent protest while others oppose this behavior, and ways that this heterogeneity is related to other intracommunity tensions, can give us a better understanding of the reasons why environmental conflict arises, and potentially how it might be prevented. Such an examination can be approached through what I call "micropolitical ecology" (Horowitz 2008): an evaluation of not only the broader politico-historical, economic and social forces influencing environmental issues, as political ecology advocates (see, e.g., Peet and Watts 2004; Biersack and Greenberg 2006), but also an up-close, "actor-oriented" (Giddens 1976; 1979; Long 1992; Murdoch and Marsden 1995) look at ways that interactions among individuals affect environmental outcomes.

This paper takes a micropolitical ecology approach to the question of what hidden tensions may shape environmental conflicts by investigating why residents of villages near a mining project in New Caledonia supported or opposed Rhéébù Nùù, an

indigenous environmental protest group that targeted the mining project. Multiple, site-specific variables interacted to influence people's decisions about whether or not to approve of the protest group's violent actions. Concerns about the mining project's potential to cause environmental degradation and about the possibility that it would fail to bring significant economic benefits to the community were important. However, an overlooked and yet crucial factor in local support for the protest group was a lack of faith in the government and, more fundamentally, in the democratic system through which representatives were elected. Thus, this instance of environmental violence "masked" a deeper social conflict, that of a crisis of political legitimacy.

However, not all community members felt that Rhéébù Nùù itself possessed the legitimacy that the government lacked. Their understandings of legitimacy were strongly influenced by beliefs about customary forms of representation as well as memories of the recent history of New Caledonia's relationships to its colonizer, France. Thus, this paper also contributes to the literature surrounding the concept of political legitimacy. While numerous studies in the field of political science have been unable to establish a relationship between legitimacy and total "system breakdown", they have found that a decline in a government's legitimacy can fuel protest (Booth and Seligson 2005), as my case study corroborates. This paper breaks new ground, however, in taking a finer-grained look at meanings of "legitimacy" and a broader look at the applicability of this concept to other groups besides formal governing institutions.

2 Crisis and Opportunity

David Easton (1965, 1975: 437) distinguishes between "specific" support for "the incumbents of offices" and "diffuse" support "for the offices themselves, for the way in which they are ordered, and for the community of which they are a part". These types of support are distinct in that a person could mistrust the political structure in general and yet, satisfied that his or her needs had been taken care of, could feel a degree of loyalty to specific authorities. Conversely, a person could mistrust particular representatives and yet maintain his or her faith in the system of which these office-holders were a temporary feature. This faith in the system, or diffuse support, is composed both of what Easton labels "trust" – confidence that the government will take care of the people's interests – and of a belief in the government's legitimacy, a sense that it is "right and proper" to respect the authorities and abide by their rules (1965: 278). Easton further classifies legitimacy into three categories: "ideological legitimacy", the perceived validity of a regime due to its moral underpinnings; "structural legitimacy", based on an acceptance of the rules or norms by which authorities acquire and exercise political power; and "personal legitimacy", which indicates a willingness to trust and follow individual authorities because of their personal qualities (1965).

Subsequent authors have examined what can occur when a government experiences a decline in specific or diffuse support: When citizens become "dissatisfied with the way in which they are represented", through perceptions that their needs are not being provided for, they may respond by "turning to antisystem popular mobilization efforts, or joining revolutionary struggles" (Mainwaring 2006: 15). Perceptions not only of a government's effectiveness in performing its duties but also of its degree of legitimacy may play a large role in this dissatisfaction, with governments perceived as

less legitimate experiencing a higher degree of protest (Booth and Seligson 2005). A loss of legitimacy – both personal and ideological – may stem from a sense that the authorities are corrupt (Seligson 2002; Mainwaring 2006: 22), which entails a decline not only in citizens' faith in individual leaders but in the moral authority of the regime as a whole. Several other conditions are necessary in order for discontent to erupt into violent resistance, however: high expectations of government performance (Mainwaring 2006: 24), a belief that particular groups within the society have been disadvantaged (Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998: 10; Di John 2007: 965), the freedom to "to blame the authorities for general social conditions" (Easton 1975: 439; Mainwaring 2006: 24) and the opportunity to express disapproval in a violent manner. Part of this opportunity lies in the presence of "groups with strong collective identities" (Percival and Homer-Dixon 1998: 280) who "perceive they share similar hardships" (Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998: 226). In the early stages, in addition to formulating grievances, these groups choose whether to pursue violent or non-violent strategies in order to make their demands known. Once the choice has been made, however, a feed-forward cycle is initiated and the struggle takes on a sort of life of its own so that it becomes very difficult for the protest group – or, indeed, the institutions it opposes – to change tactics (Gurr 1993: 189).

While providing a useful framework for conceptualizing citizens' perceptions of their government, the political science literature has not delved into the socio-cultural dimensions of the meanings of legitimacy or its crisis. If legitimacy, as formulated by Seymour Martin Lipset (1963: 77), essentially "involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society", then what are some culturally-based ways of thinking about governance, and some historical factors, that might influence whether or not people display such a belief? And if people do not in fact have faith in their governing structures, what alternative systems – based, perhaps, on long-standing beliefs about moral authority – might they propose? And what might this crisis of legitimacy imply for the strategies that protest groups might follow? Moreover, the literature has neglected to apply concepts of legitimacy to the protest groups themselves, which in turn become institutions that succeed or fail in attracting popular support. What encourages citizens in, or discourages them from, ascribing more legitimacy to these groups than to formal government bodies? And what explains the diversity of responses whereby some community members choose to place their trust in the protest groups while others do not? Such questions cannot begin to be answered through broad-brush surveys and can only be examined via in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. The present paper addresses these questions through a case study of an indigenous environmental protest group in New Caledonia.

3 Eye of the Country: Rhéébù Nùù and New Caledonia

New Caledonia is a Melanesian archipelago located 1,500 km east of Australia, at the southern boundary of the tropics (Figure 1), and has been administered by Metropolitan France since 1853 (Mathieu-Daudé 1992 (1989)). The population of approximately 264,000 (ISEE 2004) is comprised of several ethnic groups: Melanesians, known as Kanak, comprise 45 percent of the population, and people of European origin make up 34 percent of the population; the other 20 percent is comprised largely of Asians and Pacific Islanders (ITSEE 2001). Sixty percent of the population is concentrated in the capital, Nouméa, where most members of non-

Melanesian ethnic groups reside, while villages in the rural areas are almost entirely peopled by Kanak.

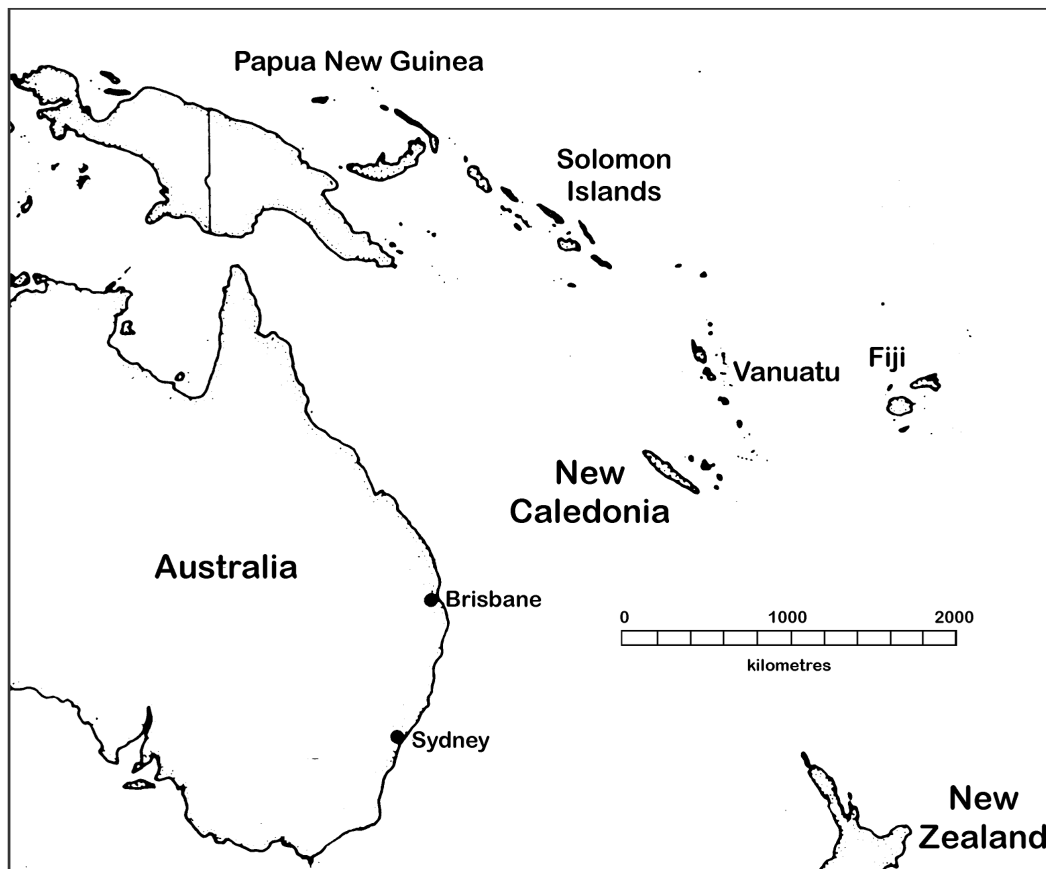

Figure 1. New Caledonia in the South Pacific

In Kanak society, the first clans to occupy an area, known as "masters of the land" (*maîtres du terrain*), have a particularly high status. They assert their claims through reference to stories that recount the arrival of their ancestors. However, there almost always are differing versions of the history of ancestors' passage through each region (Bensa and Rivierre 1982; Naepels 1998: 105) and membership of the first-occupant group is the object of constant, intense competition through strategic formations of alliances and re-tellings of family histories. Meanwhile, the chief – appointed by the first-occupant clans – was originally seen as an "elder son" (*grand fils*) whose "authority is constituted not at all of legal fear, but of a very respectful brotherly affection" (Leenhardt 1937: 149; 1980 (1930)). However, this position acquired greater significance after 1898, when the French colonial administration created the institutions of *petit chef* ("lesser chief", responsible for a village) and *grand chef* ("high chief", with influence over a broader geographical area), often distributing these titles to loyal Kanak.

Indeed, the colonial administration had a huge impact on every aspect of Kanak society. On 24 September 1853, the French government annexed New Caledonia, and soon thereafter, Kanak started being gradually displaced from their lands and placed onto reserves, often the lands of their long-standing enemies, in order to make way for colonists' cattle and mining activities. As of 1946 they were allowed

freedom of movement and released from compulsory labor, but were still largely excluded from political and economic opportunities. Resentment grew until, in the early 1970s, young students who had participated in the May 1968 movement in France returned to New Caledonia and began to form militant, nationalist, anti-colonialist political parties (see Henningham 1992: 66; Freyss 1995: 26). Many of these groups united under the rubric of the anti-capitalist Parti de libération kanak (Palika) in 1976 (Freyss 1995: 27). In 1984 a majority of the leaders of the coalition of pro-independence parties, Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS), boycotted the election (Howard 1991: 152-155). This action, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou of the Union calédonienne party, was to signal the start of a series of violent uprisings (see Henningham 1992: 82–116). The years of bloodshed, known as “les Événements” (the Events), ended in June 1988, with the Matignon Accords. This agreement was signed by Tjibaou and his opponent, Jacques Lafleur, one of the wealthiest men in New Caledonia and the leader of the loyalist Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR). With the aim of redressing the nation’s ethnically-based economic imbalances, the text of the accords promised restitution of customary lands, promotion of Kanak culture, preparation of a future New Caledonian elite, and initiation of rural development activities, and also made provisions for another referendum in 1998. Furthermore, it redrew provincial boundaries—but still left much of the territory’s wealth under the control of New Caledonians of European origins (Howard 1991: 159).

The referendum planned in the Matignon Accords took place ten years later; however, rather than addressing independence, as had been promised, the referendum was about the Nouméa Accord, drawn up in April of that year. In November 1998, voters gave an overwhelming (71.87 percent) approval to this accord. The text included a preamble acknowledging that the seizure of New Caledonia in 1853 had not taken into account the Kanak people and their “special link to the land.” It also initiated certain legislative changes to allow greater scope for the expression of Kanak identity, notably concerning the official recognition of Customary Regions (Aires coutumières) and the creation of a consultative body, the Customary Senate (Sénat coutumier). Additionally, the accords made provisions for a gradual devolution of administrative authority to the territory, which was recategorized as an “overseas country” (pays d’outremer) in 1999—although, despite the change in nomenclature, the archipelago remains a French possession. One of the powers transferred to New Caledonia was that of drafting mining regulations, while the provinces were given the responsibility of enforcing them (paragraph 3.2.5. of the Nouméa Accord). More training and economic development programs were also promised. New Caledonia would thus remain a part of France, but a new referendum would be held in fifteen to twenty years’ time.

Part of France’s interest in retaining a presence in New Caledonia revolves around the archipelago’s mineral resources. Grande Terre, the main island, possesses phenomenal mineral wealth, including cobalt, chromium, iron, manganese, gold, copper, lead, silver, gypsum, magnesium, zinc, antimony, and coal, but primarily nickel, which has been mined since 1874. New Caledonia is estimated to possess nearly 25% of the world’s nickel reserves (*Mining Journal* 1999) and is the second largest producer of ferronickel, with 143,000 metric tons produced in 2004, and the fifth greatest source of nickel ore (Lyday 2006). Mine sites are scattered across Grande Terre. New Caledonia currently possesses only one nickel refinery, located

near Nouméa, which uses pyrometallurgical technology, but two refineries are planned to be built in the near future.

The more advanced project, and the one that has attracted far more controversy, is Goro Nickel, located in the south of Grande Terre. Inco, a multinational nickel mining company based in Canada, purchased the mining rights to the Goro site in 1991. In 1999 they completed a pilot refinery and in 2000 announced their intentions to construct an operational refinery; due to the low mineral content of the soils, the refinery would use hydrometallurgical technology. This procedure, which had never before been implemented in New Caledonia, involves the use of acid under pressure (rather than heat, as with pyrometallurgical technology) to leach nickel and cobalt from the ore. The resulting effluent, containing additional dissolved metals, would be discharged into the nearby lagoon through a pipeline. In 2006 Inco was purchased by CVRD, a Brazilian multinational mining company, which in 2007 changed its name to Vale. Representatives of Goro Nickel's new parent company have announced their intentions to proceed with the project (Ribot 2007), with plans to complete the fully operational refinery by 2009. The villages closest to the Goro Nickel site are Goro (population 257), about two kilometers from the site; Touaourou (population 461), roughly five kilometers away; Waho (population 271), about six kilometers, and Unia (population 806), approximately 10 kilometers from the site (ISEE, pers. comm. June 2006) (Figure 2).

In the early 2000s, local residents and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began to express increasing concerns about potential environmental and social impacts from the project. A protest group specifically targeting Goro Nickel, known as Rhéébù Nùù, or "eye of the country" in the indigenous language of Numèè, was formed. The group is led entirely by Kanak but has support from environmental NGOs based in Nouméa, united under the umbrella group Defense Committee of the South (Coordination de défense du Sud), and NGOs in Australia, Canada and France, as well as an international citizen support base maintained, in part, through its website (http://www.rheebunuu.com). Rhéébù Nùù members have expressed concerns about the project's potential environmental impacts, particularly on the marine resources upon which the local population depends for subsistence and livelihood. They are also concerned that Kanak will not benefit adequately from employment with the project, due to the company bringing workers from the Philippines for the construction phase. They have stated that their main goals are to halt the project long enough to allow further environmental impact assessments to be performed; and to put in place a Heritage Fund (*fonds patrimoine*) for the Kanak people, supported by a percentage of mining profits from all companies operating in New Caledonia.

Starting in 2002, the group has initiated a series of actions to protest the construction of the refinery. These actions have ranged from the peaceful, such as the distribution of pamphlets denouncing Inco's activities, the holding of public meetings at local villages, and open letters sent to political leaders, to legal action in the courts, to blockades of the construction site which have turned into violent encounters with armed police, as described above. Rhéébù Nùù works closely with another organization, the Indigenous Committee for Natural Resource Management (Comité autochtone de gestion de ressources naturelles, or Caugern), created in 2005. CAUGERN argues that the Kanak, as New Caledonia's indigenous people, with

rights to the land and its resources, should be compensated for 130 years of mining companies' enrichment at the expense of local people's ecosystems and livelihoods. The group regularly organizes marches, demonstrations and strikes in New Caledonia.

Rhéébù Nùù members or sympathizers have also taken action independently of the group, such as by setting company trucks or bulldozers on fire. Meanwhile, intra-community violence escalated, peaking around the time of the April 2006 blockades. At the local village of Goro, Rhéébù Nùù members engaged in acts of vandalism, cutting off the village's electrical supply and smashing church windows. In this tense atmosphere, a new village chief had not been selected since the previous one had passed away in 2004, and village committees and councils met far more rarely than they usually did. At Waho, where many people support the mining project, a fight broke out during a visit from some residents of Unia who were members of Rhéébù Nùù. Back at Unia, several workers at the mine site, and a few people who opposed the mining project but refused to join Rhéébù Nùù, were insulted – sometimes by their own family members – and had rocks thrown at their cars, or were physically assaulted. One project supporter left the village when his house was burned down.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted from June to September 2006. During this time, I conducted semi-structured interviews in French with 52 local residents at Goro, Waho and Unia about their feelings regarding the mining project and Rhéébù Nùù. All interviews were conducted in French and all translations from them are my own. I have substituted pseudonyms for the names of all interviewees in the text below.

4 People's Feelings About the Project

Local residents had mixed feelings about the mining project. On one hand, nearly everyone was in favor of the employment opportunities that the project represented. One young man who was employed by the company felt that "we young people need this refinery in order to develop (*évoluer*)" (Christophe Ékêrêkaré, pers. comm. 4 August 2006). A senior man, employed as a subcontractor at the site, pointed out that "before, there was no work around here" and that the project "makes the economy of the county go 'round" (René Mwôrôkwê, pers. comm. 20 August 2006). Those who were not interested in working for the mining company themselves often hoped that their children would find employment there. Even those who sympathized with Rhéébù Nùù explained that they were "not against the jobs at the mine" (Marthe Ati, pers. comm. 31 July 2006). However, many were concerned that the provision of employment would be inadequate for several reasons: there would simply not be enough work for everyone in the area; many jobs, particularly the longer-term ones, would require a higher level of education than that possessed by the vast majority of local residents; and the company had begun to bring over large numbers of Filipino workers who, local people claimed, were performing unskilled labor.

Even if significant levels of employment could be provided, not everyone was confident that this could compensate for the environmental and social disruption that they expected the project to entail. Indeed, nearly everyone with whom I spoke – both those who were and were not employed with the project – were concerned about the environmental impacts of the mining activity and refinery. Many worried

that the pollution might have implications for human health, either in present or future generations.[1]

> From the moment we listened to all the chemicals they're going to dump [...] into the Havanah [a canal in the lagoon where local people fish], well, it's natural, we're afraid. [...] You never know, we don't know if it's dangerous, or.... You see? All the time, we're over there on the reef. (Martin Vuurè, pers. comm. 5 August 2006)

They were also very anxious to preserve their marine resources, which represented a reliable source of income, both in the short term for those who would not find work with the mining project and in the long term for the entire community. Loss of biodiversity such as the whales who passed by on their annual migrations and destruction of the landscape's aesthetic qualities were other concerns. Community members worried that such negative effects on humans, animals and landscapes might result from soil erosion from the open-cut activities and air pollution from the refinery's stacks, but they worried particularly about the acid involved in the hydrometallurgical procedure to be used in refining the nickel ore. Villagers were also especially concerned about what was popularly known as "the pipe" (*le tuyau*), the pipeline that would transport effluent containing waste products, including dissolved metals, into the ocean.

Thus, in a nutshell, everyone wanted the same outcomes: minimization of any environmental damage, along with the maintenance or improvement of the community's standard of living. However, some people thought the best way to ensure that GNi would minimize its impact on the environment and hire more local people was to join Rhéébù Nùù and pressure the company through strong protest, while others chose not to support the protest group, although they sympathized with its objectives. I argue that these different choices stemmed from disagreements about who best represented their interests. While nearly everyone agreed that the government could not be trusted to protect them, people differed as to whether or not they felt that Rhéébù Nùù possessed the legitimacy that the government lacked.

5 Crisis of Representation

Many community members made it clear that they did not trust elected officials to represent them. In their eyes, the State (Metropolitan France), as well as the New Caledonia and Southern Province levels of government, both governed mainly by loyalist political parties, all provided inadequate legislative protection and were at best negligent and misguided, at worst corrupt and violent. This crisis of representation thus stemmed from a crisis of personal legitimacy, in which people had lost faith in individual leaders, but also from a crisis of ideological legitimacy, in which the regime itself lacked the ethical principles necessary for good governance.

[1] Local residents had been influenced by a well-meaning and very vocal member of an NGO based in Nouméa who was convinced that the "heavy metals" that would be released into the marine environment would cause horrific birth defects. French and Canadian scientists who had been selected by Rhéébù Nùù, Inco and the local government to investigate the environmental impacts of the pipeline and effluent stated that, unlike mercury, the elements to be released did not pose the risk of causing birth defects (although there were other potential hazards for the health of the ecosystem).

5.1 The government's lack of personal and ideological legitimacy

According to these villagers, the government's unwillingness to perform its duties translated into negligence vis-à-vis the mining project's negative impacts. The government was guilty of "letting things happen" (Roger Iyixéé, pers. comm. 31 July 2006), such as allowing Inco to get away with displaying a lack of respect for local people and with failing to account for the necessity of considering the environment or local people's rights. Part of this negligence was to be found in a lack of protective legislation, making New Caledonia an "ideal place" for Inco to conduct business (Roger Iyixéé, pers. comm. 31 July 2006). Several villagers expressed the belief that such a polluting refinery would not be built in a "civilized country" (Roger Iyixéé, pers. comm. 31 July 2006) or anywhere that European or international norms were applicable, or where at least an adequate legislative framework was in place. Local residents saw this lacuna as a sign of feebleness on the part of the government:

> This [environmentally irresponsible mining] is not done in Europe, why is it being done here? It's not done in Canada. They're doing it here because here the government is too weak. The New Caledonian government, it does nothing, the provincial government and company. (Thomas Kâbwi, pers. comm. 8 August 2006)

Local people often compared the situation in New Caledonia with that in Canada, where Inco headquarters were located and where the company had a nickel mining project at Voisey's Bay, Labrador. In 2002, after nearly a decade of protest by indigenous groups, Inco had signed an Impact and Benefit Agreement (IBA) with Innu and Inuit leaders that provides employment for local people and gives them a role in monitoring the mining activity's environmental impacts. Local residents often pointed out that the Kanak had not been granted a similar IBA. They explained this in part by blaming Inco for "not taking into account the local people" but also by blaming the government for not providing a legislative framework to protect them:

> In Canada they have laws to defend people, people's interests. The Indians who are over there, they have laws that guarantee them there, whereas here in Caledonia, the French, there aren't laws that guarantee people, and there aren't laws on the mines. (Marcel Vuurè, pers. comm. August 1, 2006)

Indeed, the Nouméa Accords of 1998 had specified that New Caledonia's mining legislation, much of which still dates from the 1950s, should be revised and updated, starting with a document (*schéma minier*) outlining the main principles to be addressed. The Accords stipulated that this outline document should be completed by 2004; by the time of my fieldwork in 2006, however, it was still making slow progress due to the difficulties of grappling with such a politically sensitive topic.

These Accords, as well as the Matignon Accord of 1988, had also promised an economic readjustment that would allow for the redistribution of wealth from the Southern Province, largely populated by people of European ancestry, to the Northern Province, mainly populated by Kanak. Many people had high hopes that the Northern Province's Koniambo Project, a joint venture between multinational Falconbridge (purchased by Xstrata in November 2006) and the local, Kanak-run company, SMSP, would help to achieve such a redistribution (Horowitz 2004). This

project included plans for a refinery using the more familiar pyrometallurgical technology. Many people were concerned that the Goro Nickel project, while potentially benefiting local residents, would jeopardize the more far-reaching goal of redistributing wealth to the Kanak of the Northern Province. One villager noted that "here people expect a lot from economic development" but suggested "giving priority to the one [refinery] in the north" (Ernest Xiro, pers. comm. 20 August 2006). The fact that government officials apparently did not share their priorities, in spite of the promises made in the Accords, led some people to feel that there was "something not quite right" (Léopold Anîîjo, pers. comm. 28 July 2006), a sentiment that further discouraged them from attributing ideological legitimacy to the government in power.

Others accused the government, or individual leaders within it, of accepting bribes from Inco or having personal interests in the mining venture. The president of the Southern Province, Philippe Gomès, was in fact taken to court by Rhéébù Nùù in May 2006 and accused of accepting a bribe when a company in which he held interests was granted an important deal for the provision of air conditioners to Goro Nickel. Gomès and the CEO of Goro Nickel, Ron Renton, replied by suing Rhéébù Nùù for libel (Frédière 2006). The judge examining the former case threw it out of court on the grounds that the complainants were not themselves harmed by the contract in question; however, acting in the general interest, he instructed gendarmes to pursue the question through a search of the company's offices and an examination of Gomès. They returned the case to the same judge, having indeed found evidence of illegal possession of interests (Frédière 2007).

Worst of all, though, was the government's use of violence against its own people. The decision to send armed police to the blockades in April 2006 had fallen under the jurisdiction of the State. Rhéébù Nùù members felt that the government had thus demonstrated its willingness to support the mining company by providing it free access to such power: "The Canadian says, 'We're calling on the armed forces,' the State tells them, 'Well go ahead, take them if you want'" (Roger Iyixéé, pers. comm. 31 July 2006). Moreover, it had done so without making an effort "to understand our claims, our arguments", thus perpetuating patterns of "colonial justice" (Léopold Anîîjo, pers. comm. 28 July 2006). The result of the government's siding with the mining company, according to Rhéébù Nùù members, was that the protest group had to resort to strong actions in order to be taken seriously and listened to. The government blamed Rhéébù Nùù for engaging in forceful protest, yet had left them no choice.

> The provincial government put us aside but now they're forced to send for us, they're forced to talk with us. It's like the [territorial] government, it's like the State; they took us for terrorists but no, we're not terrorists, we haven't killed anyone, what we want is for our environment to be respected and for us to be respected, us first, the people. (Bastien Mwôrôkwê, pers. comm. 18 August 2006)

While elected officials from pro-independence parties were supposed to represent the interests of their Kanak constituencies, many community members had been disappointed by them as well. One village resident expressed dismay at the fact that, as he saw it, Kanak leaders had "turned their backs on us" (Léopold Anîîjo, pers. comm. 28 July 2006). He declared that these politicians, too, were "corrupt", thinking

only of money, and couldn't be counted on. Others noted that the only time they saw their representatives was at the approach of elections, when candidates visited the villages in an attempt to garner votes, and that they never attempted to consult the communities before taking decisions. As one local resident insisted, "we no longer trust anyone in political parties" (Nicolas Trukû, pers. comm. 2 August 2006).

5.2 Rhéébù Nùù's ideological legitimacy and Gabriel Kwùù's personal legitimacy

As a result, elected officials had lost the support of their constituency. Rhéébù Nùù members explained that they had altogether abandoned allegiances to political parties – pro-independence or loyalist – and turned instead to the protest group. As one activist explained, members of this group felt detached from, and no longer valued the role of, their elected officials, having found an alternative source of representation through the protest group: "If the politicians don't follow us, that's not our problem. [...] If at the next vote the politicians will see that they've lost a lot of votes, well that's their problem" (Pierre Ôê, pers. comm. 7 August 2006). In contrast, the protest group was divorced from politics; members insisted that it was not a political party and that its actions were being performed in the interest of the people as a whole, not for partisan purposes. Some identified the beneficiaries of Rhéébù Nùù's actions as "our children", others as "the Kanak people" or even "all New Caledonia" plus the tourists who would visit it. Thus, in contrast to their views of politicians as acting only in the interest of their party or even for individual monetary gain, Rhéébù Nùù sympathizers believed that the protest group was acting for the welfare of the wider society.

This trust in Rhéébù Nùù was, in part, due to a respect for and trust in – in other terms, ascription of personal legitimacy to – one of the group's leaders, Gabriel Kwùù. As one Rhéébù Nùù member explained, unlike politicians, Gabriel "doesn't work for himself – he works for the group" (Karine Wû-waayé, pers. comm. 31 July 2006). This trust contains an irony in that Gabriel had long been a politician, including a stint as the secretary general of the local town of Yaté from 1984 to 1989 and then the mayor from 1990 to 1995, followed by a place in the national government in 2001 where he was responsible for the Customary Affairs dossier. Gabriel was different from other politicians, though, in the eyes of his followers. Rather than being a liability, in fact, his previous involvement in politics was seen by some as an asset, due to the fact that when beginning to lead Rhéébù Nùù, Gabriel was "already politically mature" (Frédéric Ciwurii, pers. comm. 14 August 2006). Some local residents had followed Gabriel's leadership throughout his political career, which had been unusually peripatetic. He had joined the militant pro-independence party Palika early in his career and then left it in 1997 to found the Fédération des comités de coordination indépendantistes (FCCI), which was created as part of a coalition with the loyalist RPCR party and was thus viewed by many Kanak as a betrayal. In 2002, the FCCI evicted Gabriel from the party when he criticized the RPCR for granting Inco exploration rights, nearly for free, to a peninsula near the Goro site; Gabriel felt that they had sold off the country's resources too cheaply, and also worried that the refinery project in the south threatened a parallel project that was intended to redistribute wealth to the mainly Kanak Northern Province (see Horowitz 2004). One Rhéébù Nùù member explained this wandering itinerary as stemming from good will and a sort of naïveté regarding the corruption of New Caledonian politicians: Gabriel was "for sustainable development, believing that the right-wing people will do what's

necessary for things to go well. But when Gabriel understood too late that they try to turn people, that they're corrupt, it's not easy. So he left" (Léopold Anîîjo, pers. comm. 28 July 2006). Others explained that they had followed him throughout because of his personal qualities: his intelligence, education (he had studied civil engineering in Paris) and – above all – trustworthiness; he had "always had absolutely clear ideas, without ideas behind [ulterior motives]" (Nicolas Trukû, pers. comm. 2 August 2006). Another Rhéébù Nùù leader, Maurice Cêrîî, explained his loyalty to Gabriel by the fact that he owed his political savvy to his colleague:

> He's a guy who trains people, those who want to follow him. Me, if I'm here today, if I manage to hold debates with people, it's because of Gabriel. So I have a belief in him, I follow him. He's a man of his word, [...] and he's a man of learning. [...] I am with him because of all his qualities. (pers. comm. 14 August 2006)

Their perception of Gabriel as intelligent and educated led some to a conclusion that his role was to keep abreast of the issues at hand, through discussions with scientists and lawyers, while the role of Rhéébù Nùù's members was to participate as "simple activists" (Thomas Kâbwi, pers. comm. 8 August 2006). However, village residents also particularly appreciated the information sessions that Gabriel regularly held after church services. Even a villager who felt that he could not participate directly in Rhéébù Nùù's actions because of a family dispute with Gabriel nonetheless felt that "luckily there are people like Gab" to fight for Kanak people's interests (Armand Droviia, pers. comm. 5 August 2006).

6 Crisis of Structural Legitimacy

One reason that people gave for trusting Gabriel was that (although he did not occupy a position of high hereditary social status within the customary structure) he had been chosen to lead Rhéébù Nùù by Charles Atiti, the late chief of Goro, and had also obtained the support of the late chief of Unia, Grégoire Tara. This reflects the second, deeper crisis that led to support for Rhéébù Nùù, a crisis not only of ideological but also of structural legitimacy in which, because of a deep disappointment with the performance of elected officials, local people no longer trusted in democratic structures to protect their interests. Instead, they were beginning to put their faith in a revitalization of customary authority as the true representative of the interests of the Kanak people. This sentiment was exemplified at an open meeting, organized by Rhéébù Nùù at Goro on July 14, 2006. When the leaders opened the floor for discussion, a community member voiced his concern that political parties on both sides no longer held the solution to their problems:

> Me, my thinking, it's about the elected representatives. Because the problem now lies in the elections. For that to resolve the problem with Inco, we must no longer vote for FLNKS, we must no longer vote for RPCR, we have to change methodologies. And that's where we'll win. [...] So let's change the political parties, to put in place new parties too, to change the structure. (pers. comm. 14 July 2006)

While his suggestion appeared to involve modifying, while continuing to work within, the existing political system, another community member proposed a more radical

solution. She had entirely lost faith in democratic structures, which seemed inevitably to lead to greedy struggles over power. Instead, she felt that customary authorities were better able to represent their subjects and advocated empowering them to fight on behalf of the Kanak people.

> I think we have to reassert the value of the customary structure. Because when we saw for politics, there's a free-fall there. [...] Whereas let's give back to our chieftainships the power to express themselves. [...] That's our own fundamental right, it's customary law. [...] And we tried to work with the legal system, we found nothing, we are on standby. So if everyone gets up and starts hitting the table to say that we exist, we the chieftainships of the whole country. (pers. comm. 14 July 2006)

It is somewhat ironic that this statement was made by a woman. Within customary structures, women can never occupy a position of decision-making power, while a French law that came into effect in 2000, and has been applied in New Caledonia, requires political parties to field equal numbers of men and women for elections. The fact that this community member felt that senior men who had inherited their position of authority would better represent her interests than democratically elected politicians of both genders reflects a deep disillusionment with the effectiveness of political and legal structures in New Caledonia.

Indeed, as I have found elsewhere in New Caledonia (Horowitz 2008), there was a sentiment of mistrust of politicians and, therefore, a tendency for people to locate the legitimacy of a project in the fact that it had been initiated, and was supported, by customary authorities. This crisis of structural legitimacy may have been due, in part, to concerns about corruption, as discussed above. Additionally, it may have reflected long-standing tensions between Kanak citizens and a government that remains ultimately under the aegis of the colonial power. Recognition of a unique Kanak cultural identity has always formed an important part of pro-independence leaders' demands (Henningham 1992; Freyss 1995; Tjibaou 1996), and respect for customary authority structures, despite having been significantly altered by the colonial government as described above, comprise a crucial element of this Kanak identity. By insisting on the reassertion of customary authority, villagers were thus simultaneously reasserting their cultural identity.

Rhéébù Nùù's leaders had evidently taken note of the prevailing crisis of personal, ideological and structural legitimacy affecting people's sentiments of mistrust in the government, and had built upon this in reinforcing their own legitimacy through deliberate association with customary authority structures. At the group's inception, they had taken the strategy of inviting as many customary authorities as possible to participate in ceremonies, if not in actual decision-making processes. On July 12, 2002 (pointedly, the weekend of the French Bastille Day celebrations), the newly-formed protest group erected a *bois tabou*: a large pole, carved with human faces and animals in a traditional style, on a nearby mountain where ancestral spirits were known to reside. Long strips of printed cloth were then tied around the pole. This was a version, writ large, of a practice also found elsewhere in New Caledonia (Naepels 1998: 12-13; Sonia Grochain, pers. comm. 26 February 2008; Adrian Muckle, pers. comm. 2 March 2008) in which people erect a wooden pole topped with a knot of straw containing magical plants. This pole, known colloquially as a "taboo", forbids

access to specific areas of land due to a transgression, thus intentionally indicating a conflict over resources. In setting up such a pole, Rhéébù Nùù signaled to the mining company as well as to local residents that there was a conflict over the possession and use of resources in that region that needed to be resolved (Dominique Yivéé, pers. comm. 10 July 2006). In organizing this event, Gabriel Kwùù invited all the high chiefs of the Djubea Kapone customary region to participate. He followed customary protocols, whereby a message is passed, along with a customary "gesture" (a gift normally consisting of a length of cloth, tobacco and cash), according to a prescribed order of recipients that reflects one's alliances. Nearly all high chiefs of the region were present at the event (Mapou 2003). Every year, on the anniversary of this day, Rhéébù Nùù members assemble to climb the mountain (by motorized vehicle and/or by foot) where prominent members give speeches and all commemorate the fact that their struggle is not yet over.

One local resident noted that Rhéébù Nùù was not like the non-governmental organizations based in Nouméa because, instead, it involved following customary protocols and working with customary authorities. He insisted that Rhéébù Nùù was "the work of the elder, Charles Atiti," who had given the group its name (Lucien Uuwoo, pers. comm. 12 August 2006). Rhéébù Nùù's president agreed, adding "so that's where our strength lies; it doesn't matter what things people say [about Gabriel's political past]" (Maurice Cêrîî, pers. comm. 14 August 2006). Others observed that the chiefs of Goro and Unia had kept the best interests of their people in mind and had therefore created the protest group in order to defend them against a large, powerful multinational.

7 Rhéébù Nùù as Lacking Structural, Personal and Ideological Legitimacy

In summary, then, Rhéébù Nùù used customary gestures and relied on the support of customary authorities in order to assert its legitimacy. This strategy encouraged many local residents to support Rhéébù Nùù because they had lost faith in their elected representatives and, more fundamentally, in the political system itself. However, this approach did not result in support from all community members. First, not all had lost faith in the political parties and therefore not everyone agreed that Rhéébù Nùù's tactic was appropriate. One local resident who was an active member of a pro-independence party explained that the party was not against Rhéébù Nùù, which had an "interesting approach". However, they were "disappointed" because the group had decided to go through the Customary Senate and Caugern whereas they should have presented their demands to FLNKS and allowed the politicians to do the negotiating with the mining company (Antoine Ékêrêkaré, pers. comm. 30 July 2006). He recognized that Rhéébù Nùù thought that the politicians were corrupt and had therefore chosen to "go through customary authorities" but insisted that even "customary authorities must follow the political steps" (pers. comm. 30 July 2006).

Moreover, not all community members agreed that Rhéébù Nùù did in fact have the backing of the chieftainships and customary landowners. Some actually accused Rhéébù Nùù leaders of displaying a lack of respect for custom and customary authority. One villager accused Gabriel Kwùù of hypocrisy, observing that he and his family resided in Nouméa, where his younger children were in school and where his son's wedding had recently taken place, "and then he comes to tell us things about custom" (Baptiste Nyuxara, pers. comm. 9 August 2006). He saw Gabriel's interest in

an alliance with customary authority as stemming from a failed political career in which he had been kicked out of the FCCI and had "lost importance". Gabriel Kwùù's ancestors were from another region and therefore he had no basis for claims to customary landownership in the region around the Goro site; in fact, his clan was "at the end of the chain" in the hierarchy at Unia. Nonetheless, because "Inco said, 'We want to talk with the customary landowners,'" Gabriel Kwùù had allied himself with these first-occupant clans, thus displaying the same type of hunger for power as any other politician. Meanwhile, the head of a clan with claims to customary ownership of part of the area of interest to the mining company insisted that Rhéébù Nùù had not been able to "bring the customary authorities along with them" because, in reality, they had not respected customary protocols, and he resented the fact that "they say they speak in the name of the customary authorities but the customary authorities haven't handed over to them" (Dominique Yivéé, pers. comm. 10 July 2006). The installation of the *bois tabou* had been Rhéébù Nùù's idea, and they had erected it before the arrival of the customary authorities at the mountain whereas the group should have waited to receive the elders' authorization. According to Valentin, that moment had marked the beginning of a disagreement between Rhéébù Nùù and the customary authorities. Another villager felt that this tension had deep roots, stemming from a time long before Rhéébù Nùù even existed. This person recalled that during the violent pro-independence Events of the 1980s, activists led by Gabriel Kwùù had targeted the village chief for being too friendly with local gendarmes (Vincent Ékêrêkaré, pers. comm. 5 August 2006). They had burned down the chief's house, killed his pigs, and threatened and insulted his family. A young boy at the time, Vincent had been profoundly marked by this experience and found it difficult to forgive Gabriel even though Rhéébù Nùù did "good things". He recalled that "Gabriel Kwùù has allied himself with the chieftainships today but at that time he had no respect" (pers. comm. 5 August 2006). Thus, in Vincent's eyes, not only did Gabriel lack personal legitimacy because of his past actions; Rhéébù Nùù lacked structural legitimacy because its alliance with the customary authorities was clearly strategic rather than sincere.

Rhéébù Nùù had displayed further disrespect of customary authority, according to Odilon, by resorting to violence shortly after the deaths of the two high chiefs who had helped to create and direct the group and who had always advocated the path of negotiation. Not only did group members destroy company equipment; they also targeted fellow community members. Odilon reported that a group of about 20 young men, under the influence of alcohol, had come to his house where they had insulted Odilon and his wife for not having joined Rhéébù Nùù, resulting in a fist fight. When he broached the subject at a community meeting, pointing out that Rhéébù Nùù was "fighting against Inco, not against us", village councilors (many of whom sympathized with the protest group) did not take the opportunity to reprimand the village youths. Instead, these authorities, who included his own brother, told Odilon that "those who oppose Rhéébù Nùù [...] will be subjected to what Inco suffers" (Vincent Ékêrêkaré, pers. comm. 5 August 2006). He concluded that such behavior indicated that the group had "no more respect in customs, what the elders did, what they said" (pers. comm. 5 August 2006). Thus, although he supported their aims, Vincent did not feel that Rhéébù Nùù represented him, on yet another count: They used tactics of which he did not approve. For Vincent, then, the group lacked moral authority, or ideological legitimacy.

Other local residents similarly chose not to support Rhéébù Nùù because, although they agreed with the protest group's objectives, particularly regarding environmental protection, they felt that the group used inappropriate means to achieve these ends. These community members insisted that they themselves were "against violence" (Ruth Pwita, pers. comm. 10 July 2006) and accused Rhéébù Nùù of "savagery" or being "nasty", and certainly not "staying calm" (Albane Juru, pers. comm. 9 August 2006). Some did not feel that violence was wrong under all conditions but believed that such strong protest was useless in the face of a powerful multinational. Others preferred to trust the company for as long as possible, while holding the threat of violence in reserve: "If Inco doesn't make the effort to manage pollution there's a chance of an eruption one day" (Jean Yivéé, pers. comm. 13 August 2006). Some of these people explained their hesitation to resort to violence by noting the comparison, prominent in many people's minds, between the Events of April 2006 and the bloody Events of the 1980s in which 40 people had died, mostly Kanak. As Vincent Ékêrêkaré insisted,

> We are no longer in '84 [the year the worst phase of the Events began]. I heard that they said that we have to do like in '84 – that was war – the State sent in the army. [...] We were victims in '84; if we have to go to war again, I don't agree. (pers. comm. 5 August 2006)

Another community member had been an active participant in the violent, pro-independence actions of this period and had, in fact, been under the leadership of Gabriel Kwùù. He observed that the active members of the protest group were largely those who also had been with Gabriel in the '80s. "He taught us many things; lots of people discovered: 'That's how it is, there's breakage'; no, I've calmed down" (Baptiste Nyuxara, pers. comm. 9 August 2006). For all these villagers, then, Rhéébù Nùù's use of violent tactics meant that the group did not possess ideological legitimacy in their view.

8 Conclusions

This paper has applied a micropolitical ecology approach in an examination of local people's responses to an indigenous environmental protest group that is targeting a multinational mining project in New Caledonia. Nearly everyone in the community was concerned about the project's potential to cause environmental damage, and many felt that the provision of employment for local people would be inadequate to compensate for this damage. With such concerns, people might normally turn to their governing body for protection. In this case, however, the government suffered from a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of many local people. Perceptions of corruption and negligence, a dearth of protective legislation, a failure to prioritize the redistribution of wealth to the largely Kanak Northern Province, as well as the use of violence against protestors, all contributed to a deficiency in the government's ideological legitimacy as well as the personal legitimacy of some of its members. This lack of political legitimacy encompassed not only the majority loyalist party but also members of pro-independence parties whom local residents similarly viewed as corrupt and as having neglected their constituents. Even more fundamentally, though, people had lost faith not only in the present government but in democratic structures themselves, which seemed to lead inevitably to partisan struggles and disappointing performance from corrupt officials. Instead, they sought to strengthen a system of governance that

countered colonial forms of power and comprised a crucial part of a Kanak cultural identity: customary authority.

In order to increase its own structural legitimacy, Rhéébù Nùù deliberately allied itself with customary authorities. As result, many people turned to the protest group, whom they saw as possessing structural legitimacy through its association with local chiefs and ideological legitimacy due to being free of political corruption. In particular, they ascribed personal legitimacy to one of the group's leaders, Gabriel Kwùù. Thus, the environmental violence that occurred as Rhéébù Nùù set up barricades of burning tires and used a pick-up truck to charge gendarmes who fired back at them was not simply an incidence of resource abundance or scarcity driving civil strife; it masked another, deeper tension rooted in local politico-economic history: a crisis of political legitimacy. Thus, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that eschews simplistic, deterministic theories about the causes of environmental violence in favor of richer, more nuanced analyses of diverse, site-specific factors that inform instances of resource-related conflict.

Additionally, this paper has explored socio-cultural dimensions of "legitimacy". Perceptions of corruption, negligence and failed promises were not the only contributing factors to the decision of many local people to switch their allegiances from political parties to Rhéébù Nùù. New Caledonia's long history of colonial oppression and the on-going independence movement have led to demands for recognition of a Kanak identity, and customary authority structures are widely viewed by Kanak as a unique and crucial feature of their society and thus of their identity. Showing allegiance to a group that based its legitimacy in an association with customary authority, therefore, constituted a reassertion of Kanak identity. Furthermore, this allegiance reflected culturally-informed understandings of the role and attitudes of customary authority figures. Many local residents were convinced that these individuals – who were inevitably male, usually senior, and often had inherited their positions – nonetheless were more likely to represent the interests of their entire group of "subjects" than were elected officials, who seemed (in the eyes of their constituency) inexorably to succumb to desires for power and money. In contrast, villagers were certain that the local chiefs possessed the wisdom appropriate for their position and cared deeply about the people for whom they were responsible. Thus, both historical memory and cultural beliefs can inform people's decisions about whether to place their trust in the government or in a group that opposes it through alliance with an alternative form of governance.

Finally, this paper has investigated the application of the concept of legitimacy not only to governments but also to the protest groups that oppose them. By presenting itself as a body representing the interests of the local people and soliciting their support, a protest group itself becomes an institution subject to the same criteria of legitimacy as its opponent. In the Goro area, many villagers felt that Rhéébù Nùù and its leaders possessed more structural, personal and ideological legitimacy than did the government. They chose to place their faith in Rhéébù Nùù as a powerful alternative to politics, led by a charismatic and trustworthy figure and based in customary authority as an alternative governance structure. Others, however, did not ascribe legitimacy to Rhéébù Nùù as a group that represented the community's best interests. Some did not lend specific support to Gabriel Kwùù as he did not have personal legitimacy in their eyes. Nor did everyone agree that the protest group

respected custom. None questioned customary authority as a valid source of structural legitimacy; however, not all felt that Rhéébù Nùù indeed had respect for, or the support of, this alternative authority system. In fact, some local residents believed that Gabriel Kwùù's and Rhéébù Nùù's alliance with customary authority figures was merely a strategic move, an example of the same type of power-hungry behavior that any politician would display. Others agreed with Rhéébù Nùù's aims, yet disagreed with the means that they used to achieve these; in their eyes, a resort to violence was not justified (at least not yet) and caused them to question the group's ideological legitimacy. Thus, protest groups are subject to the same scrutiny as the governments or other bodies that they oppose, and may have personal, ideological and structural legitimacy ascribed to, or withheld from, them.

Such a micropolitical ecology approach can provide a useful perspective on issues of environmental violence. While a broad-brush, statistical approach may be helpful in identifying broad trends and patterns, it can never elucidate the multiple, complex reasons behind any particular instance of resource-related violent actions – or lack thereof. Instead, an examination of specific histories and cultural forms is necessary in order to understand people's choices about who possesses the most political legitimacy and who best represents their interests and, thus, to whom they should give their support.

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