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WRITING IN A DOMINATED COUNTRY WHEN YOUR CULTURE AND YOUR LANGUAGE ARE THE INSTRUMENTS OF DOMINATION

For the humanist, he who in his deepest heart always feels the human presence first, before any other, be it in politics, economics, diplomacy or literary or wider artistic creativity, for he who, without making it restrictive, but because it comes naturally, places man at the core of all thinking, for that person, that humanist, on the day when the awareness dawned in him of the specific situation being visited upon his fellow men, as a consequence of colonisation, writing became, certainly not to his knowledge, no doubt through the calls to action of his conscience, his way of continuing to exist.

Writing in a dominated country cannot be a neutral act, no matter which community you belong to. When you belong to the dominating community, the one holding the keys, not only to power, but not particularly those keys, but especially those that make it possible to understand the concepts underlying the laws of all kinds which govern society, when your own language is the dominating language, the language of colonisation, the language of communication between the various ethnic groups, of course, but also between the speakers of various indigenous languages, when your culture is the culture of colonisation, that which contributes to stifling the indigenous culture, writing then becomes the path to a second birth, another existence, one which became essential as an understanding dawned of what colonisation really meant. This realisation is a deeply felt event, a real 'first death'. But it is inseparable from this first death as it is with all those deaths that leave us lifeless without taking our life away forever, that necessarily we will be reborn. You must be reborn or indeed die, in other words succumb. Without it being a decision, the energy of survival, which manifested itself in me, did so through writing, amongst other things, but it is in this form, writing, that this energy enables communication and exchange. Writing for me is the possibility of being reborn.

But let there be no mistake, it will not be enough to produce words, sentences, chapters and publications for writing to be effective. Writing is above all the dialogue with oneself, it is questioning, doubt, writing is living on the edge. If you want your writing to be effective in achieving rebirth, if you wish to attain another consciousness through it, in other words if you write because your energy exceeds your will, then the only solution, the only door through which you can pass is to open up to the world.

To be born again through writing requires the pen to be dipped in the ink of sincerity and experience. There is no point in writing with a guilty conscience because I am not guilty of anything other than my own acts. Self-flagellation, mea culpas, shouldering the coloniser's burden, are all no doubt necessary at some stage in one's development. This is only true of writing until such time as the realisation comes. To continue down that path, if that relieves your conscience and gives you a sense of morbid

exaltation, is futile when you find oneself at the frontier, when you must create, find your own way. To write constantly with a guilty conscience provides no assistance with overcoming or transforming the situation at hand, it is not enough, you expect more of writing. To restrict yourself to feeling guilty as a purpose in itself unfortunately also means succumbing. By submerging myself in writing, I hoped, I expected to get to know the world better and myself and especially to better understand the relationships, which have built up between human beings. In a country still colonised or being decolonised, this issue of human relationships, between different ethnic groups and cultures is of course fundamental, essential. Writing is this creative energy, essentially looking to the future, towards more justice, a better balance, more friendship, more consideration, a better quality of life. The idea is not particularly to write about the suffering of the colonised people, that suffering can only be written about by he or she who has experienced it or still experiences it on a daily basis. One can write about compassion, understanding, knowing, suffering and the trials and tribulations suffered by the other. In a situation still experiencing the consequences of colonialism, to write in this way is not a waste of time, neither is it useless because many people are still quite unaware of all aspects of the other's life. It is an essential step, without which there can be no continuation to writing. To write of the suffering of the other is a primary form of vigilance but not an end in itself, it is a first step towards a greater understanding of your country's situation. However I believe that it is dangerous to appropriate another's suffering because that would be like writing about something you had not experienced. No-one can write of another's suffering. Writing in a dominated country when your own culture is the dominating one means first and foremost writing of *grandeur*, of universality, of the contribution of the other's culture to the genius of mankind. There is a duty to this other person who for a long time has been reduced to the simple existence of a Stone Age man without a real culture, the duty is to reveal to the world the existence, in the most complete sense of the term including the cultural, political and economic dimensions, of the other. To reveal that those who we rub shoulders with have been able to and still can exist without us. To write about my feeling and my experience of the existence of the other in his every dimension, far from being a risk, is quite on the contrary, a unique chance to grow, a source of enrichment and development, on the spiritual, moral, cultural and political levels. To write about meeting the other, a meeting made possible through an open mind, made necessary by the "small death" referred to above. To write so that others may open their eyes and love and respect the other, he who has been denied, he to whom the dominating culture, one's own culture, has denied all humanity, without realising that this has meant that it has denied its own children that same humanity. To live at last as equals and it is not by denying each other or digging your own grave that you can help produce love for the other. To create one's own emotional and mental imbalance, by negating oneself. In other words by attaching excessive guilt to one's culture, one's civilisation, cannot contribute at all in the short-term to emancipation or the achievement of more justice and more equity. This again would be to succumb, to commit cultural suicide; the rejection of one's roots is another wall to be imprisoned behind, in other words, one would be rejecting one's own mother.

To write at all times with vigilance.

It is preferable to be vigilant about yourself rather than commit self-mutilation.

What I call vigilance is avoiding these various ways of giving up. Colonial self-satisfaction and the rejection of the full dimension of the other, self-guilt as an end in itself, cultural suicide and its attendant refusal to accept responsibility for yourself. Vigilance means being careful about yourself, about what I love in myself and what I love in the other, it's about expressing that love. Vigilance also means being careful to keep watch around you for what goes against what I believe in, the understanding of people, particularly in a multi-ethnic and multicultural situation, and to say so.

At my own humble level, writing is what enables me to live with the drama into which I was thrust when I began to understand my country's political situation 25 years ago. With an intellectual, or an artist, or just a sensitive human being, that onset of awareness can only be a shock. To accept the shock and to overcome it makes it possible to accept your human condition. Who can deny the reality of colonial history? Nobody. Therefore it is better to be quite aware of it, in vigilant awareness. This is the only way to be able to continue to live, intellectually and artistically. My writing is my path; it takes me to the knowledge and awareness of the universe in which I am. Its purpose is also to build a bridge between our communities in New Caledonia, bringing into the equation the beauty and the full scale of the culture and the experience of the Kanak people. This can only be true provided that I do not denigrate myself at the same time but always and only show vigilance in every way.

The universal can be encapsulated in a few words, a few ideas, a few dramatic circumstances and so much the better. In the name of this universal, the dominant culture has set too much aside. Vigilance is also exercised to maintain differences and too bad for that which, only apparently, goes against hastily defined universal values.

In New Caledonia, the literary silence of the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, was induced by the noise around the creation of the French Overseas Territories. Literary creative impulses were anaesthetised by the technical and material modernisation of the country: roads, bridges, telephone, telegraph, television, airport, schools, full employment, etc, the headlong rush to modernity, to development, no more time to create, no more time to ask yourself questions, more time and especially no need, to be vigilant. All the answers were provided, or imposed, in advance by material development and it was just too bad for those who were not satisfied with this. The feeling of entering modernity at full speed and therefore entering the world made hearts swell with intellectual security. What question marks, what doubts could therefore remain in the face of this concrete, palpable, intangible responses, evidence that we were all, indigenous people and other New Caledonians of every origin, on the right path, of the path which, as if by magic, does away with the grain of sand which prevents easy sleep. Doubt? At first, any doubters were just laughed at, but if anyone persevered with it, they were condemned to marginalisation. Therefore there was a literary silence because at the time was not right for creativity, because let's not forget that creativity means questioning, even in a tiny unconscious way, what already exists but also because of those who despite everything were inhabited by an energy more powerful than the accumulation of material things, found themselves more or less muffled

by the absence of practical support for their creativity; no book publishers, no art gallery, no financial support for publishing.

Over about 10 years, the Matignon Accords with their accompanying measures have transformed New Caledonia's political and economic life. Literature had anticipated these changes a few years in advance, modestly but nevertheless with truth. Since the very beginning of the Eighties, more and more books are being published and new titles regularly appear each year. True stories, testimonies, political essays, poetry, short stories under joint or individual authorship, novels, and soon, theatre. All this writing, all these authors, are in stark contrast with the silence of the Fifties, Sixties and the first half of the Seventies, and express, relate, speak dream, hope and imagine a country. In contrast also with most of the authors from between the wars (with the particular exception of Marriott and Baudoux), who wrote about New Caledonia from the outside, today's authors write about the country from the inside, with their heart and their gut feelings. The recentness of an important institutional change is not unrelated to this literary development (but not only, because there is also major development in painting and music, due as much to European artists as to Kanak and Polynesian ones, as with literature). The Matignon Accords have certainly helped in obtaining more support for publishing and this in turn has elicited writing. But it is love and the desire to have a stake in the future of New Caledonia, which leads the artists to express their creativity. Not all show the vigilance I was talking about just now, but enough do for one to be able to hope in an immediate future that will be somewhat more flourishing for the arts in general and literature in particular, in a context in which ignorance of the other will not be possible nor, I hope, wanted.

The idea of such a paper on my writing in New Caledonia came to me when I read a book by Patrick Chamoiseau: "Writing in a dominated country" (*Ecrire en pays dominé*), my concern being at that time to address this idea: "Writing in a dominated country, when your own culture, your own language are the tools of cultural and colonial domination". What I discovered in writing this paper is that writing under such circumstances is not just a banal event and it cannot be an exercise in style and mere aesthetic satisfaction. Writing must be demanding and true, always sincere, therefore writing is being reborn.

It is precisely because of the vigilance I refer to that I have some reluctance about cultural integration. Cultures are either integrated or they are not and therefore I fear and am apprehensive about the absence and inertia that I feel emerge from that statement. Perhaps because of the final, definitive impression given by the verb "are" in this statement, or possibly because of the question which springs immediately to mind when hearing this affirmation: and after that, and now that our culture has been decreed an integrated culture, where are we heading? The statement that all cultures are hybrid fruits is necessary these days and I will therefore not indulge in contradicting it, one of the reasons being because I believe that in my country this is still a prospect that very few people are ready to accept and that not the slightest doubt neither the slightest obstacle to meeting others and oneself must be left.

As a writer and therefore a creator but also a seeker of meaning and beauty and truth, I prefer to think and say that I am in a cultural interface, to use a term borrowed from economic geography, both for the area of exchange and encounter that it provides and also for the mental space that it can engender in everyone. I have the feeling that I am living in a place of borrowings, of meetings, of confrontations, or friendships, of love and of rejection. A space, which is that of a blank page, a theatre or dance, stage, a path where two or more cultures have decided to meet. The attitude of the writer, but such that it is an attitude that one can believe to be that of all creators can only be one of momentum. Cultural integration, in contrast with biological integration, is never achieved. It can only be perpetual creation, alloys, alliances forming and disintegrating, borrowings, rejections, questioning of oneself and one's parent and historical culture, free and independent exchange.

The task has not yet to be commenced, nothing will ever be fully and finally accomplished or finished, but everything is possible, and the whole process has started. The horizon is clearing, the tradewinds are blowing regularly and with enough strength for the canoe to cross the reef and reach a friendly shore.

This path is that of 'cultural interface', which stands in opposition, at the present time, to the widespread and too easily accepted idea of 'cultural integration', a rapid and practical association of terms, forming a vague shapeless sack into which everything is stuffed, in the bottom of which you find more mouldy crusts than fresh bread. Cultural interfacing, however, is the recognition by creators, artists, painters, musicians, writers, architects and poets of the vision that we exist in a space where fortunately the borders are vaguely drawn, where Pacific and Western cultures meet and cross-fertilise.

Therefore the idea of an integrated culture, with mixing as the ultimate goal, leads the artists to want to create something mixed, something fully and finally mixed (as if what happens genetically could automatically happen in painting or poetry). The idea of cultural interfacing, leads one to create something personal, a one-off result of energy from different horizons. That creative energy can be mixed but not creativity. I dream of no longer seeing paintings in exhibitions boasting to be the manifestation of culturally integrated painting and recognised as such just because an artist has contented himself or herself with sticking a couple of signs on a canvas (masks, totems or even petroglyphs), of Kanak culture, without any multiplied energy showing through.

Is not the unspoken goal then thus to acquire legitimacy? Integrated culture as a legitimacy no thank you! More exclusion! I prefer to do my journeys, sometimes uncertain, sometimes constructive, back and forth along the border of cultural interface. I do not claim or wish to acquire a house mound or a clan through my literary creativity. Legitimacy, if it is indeed needed, while we are talking about it, is not acquired through spectacular acts but by a form of real experience not open to analysis, but which does not escape the heart of the other, my partner in dialogue, he with whom I wish to build a nation.

Our generation will never see the integration and it is fallacious to assert the contrary and it is indeed the best way of never getting there because what is true for the Americas is far from being true for the Pacific. The interface as a mental attitude is the attitude which makes it possible to guarantee an intellectual and mental equilibrium, to keep the field of spontaneity open, to remain within oneself and at the same time to be closer to the other, while avoiding fusion.

What I reject is not the idea of cultural integration, it would be madness and ignorance on my part to do so, but it's the fact that in New Caledonia the political, administrative and cultural authorities are using this idea, this possible future reality, and presenting New Caledonia and cultural integration, not only as a *fait accompli* but, and more especially, as a wish expressed and totally shared by all the people of this country. It's a bit early for New Caledonia. We are just starting out with the real meeting between free communities and only now just beginning to look at each other with a frank and open expression. That is why I prefer the idea and the practice of cultural interfacing because there is less risk of seeing the hope of a real and constructive friendship fade away.

It is up to the artists as much as it is up to ordinary people to practice and give life to a possible future cultural integration and not up to the various powers to decree that it to be so. To assert the urgency of an integrated culture from the top of the pyramid of the hierarchy also accelerates innovation in the dominated culture despite that culture's own internal tempo. The results are likely to benefit a not-always-very-pleasing process of world cultural globalisation, because in the process of acceleration, yet again, it will be the cultures of powerful countries, which have the most chance of coming out on top.

The following short texts illustrate my exploration, my conscious movement around that cultural interface that is New Caledonia.

Text No 1

Text written light-handedly No 2 Ouvea July 1999

Here, all is incomplete; the house I am in, where I am going to sleep for just one night is finished. The cement walls are polished and smooth, but unpainted, none of them are painted, except the four inside walls of the bedroom, the owner`s bedroom, not the one he has given me. In the main room, the sitting-room, the electrical circuitry has been installed in accordance with the new standards; white ducting perfectly sized for its purpose, thick for the main switchboard and thinner for supplying current to the ceiling light, from which hangs just a bare 60 watt bulb! No lampshade. Everything is in place around the windows and even the wooden frame is painted, the handle is on, except that three panes of the eight are missing and have been replaced with squares of cardboard temporarily taped in with liberal amounts of brown adhesive tape. In one corner of the kitchen, some cartons full of ceramic tiles have been stored with the tiles still in the half-open boxes, whereas they should have been laid already. And there are some shrubs which haven't really been planted, some trees which have been there for a long time right in front of the house from before the owner`s time, a dilapidated plastic chair is an unstable support for some leftover structural timber intended apparently for a future veranda. So everything is incomplete but totally bearable.

Here then, just a few steps away from an immense beach, some 15 km of unbroken, smooth fine white sand, perfectly untouched except for an occasional dinghy pulled up on the beach and this beach gives onto the lagoon stretching out for an untold distance well beyond the horizon, and almost within touching distance, all that incompleteness. Almost well-ordered incompleteness, of virtually all at the island`s buildings, because I realise that this house shows the same features as their gardens and fences built in such a way that no-one really notices their existence, from the half-painted classrooms with half-fixed ceilings and all along the roadside I see incompleteness, no signposting to the airport which still has no public toilets worthy of the name. Why?

So as to say that over and above the bare minimum, material things should not demand of people more effort or money than necessary, otherwise this would be detrimental to the time and energy to be spent with other men and women in the community. One must preserve the time and the strength of being together, the desire to merely talk about what you should do today, this very day, 20th July 1999, discussion, a pretext for living together, almost side-by-side, and always knotting the threads of conversation, friendship, heart and spirit.

Nicolas Kurtovitch

Text No 2

Her where I am

Text written light-handedly No 14

Here where I am, where I grew up, my land was nothing but a bit of cement, a bit of tarmac. Under my bare feet then no earth no mud no dust when it was dry, everything clean, smooth neat and easy to wash, concrete and from time to time the floor squeaking, which is old and splintering, but which is soft and grey and which we haven't polished for ages.

In the yard, the all-wood house was located right at the end of the street and the yard stretched out behind it, it could have been made from beaten earth like most of the houses in this old neighbourhood that for reasons of cleanliness, hygiene and easiness we would have claimed also modernity, it has been clumsily paved over with large concrete blocks 1 meter square, therefore in this yard the cement has easily and completely replaced the earth. Sometimes the join between the slabs is far from perfect and while at the beginning nothing dropped into the gap, after a few weeks wild grass started coming up where it shouldn't have where a few square centimeters of earth still survived. Nobody thought of pulling up these weeds and so much the better because my feet could still get lost there and wonder between the slabs to find what was missing, something soft, something damp, something gentle something surprising and something changing.

A few days ago, I walked close to this house which no longer seemed inhabited, where I had lived for a few years during my youth, far from my own family, but not in any way abandoned, I met a man who was waiting on the pavement, which is now perfectly straight and flat, with street lamps. dustbins and a clean gutter because it is regularly cleaned. That man! What was he dressed in!? Strips of cloth, it looked like, with old patched up clothes picked up from the heap that the Catholic Relief refused to take in and left outside the main door of their store a few steps down from the cathedral, not exactly over-dressed but sufficiently dressed to be able to stand on the street corner without running the risk of being arrested and in his right hand alongside his body he held a scruffy faded jute bag which must have been brown at one time. The bag hung from his shoulder by a few pieces of intertwined string. The tip of a bushknife poked out of it and two or three sticks, or what I thought were sticks, but after thinking about it they must have been taro plants. I'm sure he was smiling, not the beam of a clown or a moronic television presenter, but a barely perceptible smile but a definite one.

This poor man was happy, content by what awaited him at this very early hour. I knew where he was going, I did not know what his exact destination was, but I knew which place he was going to; the field somewhere out behind the street, behind the houses and their yards on the hillside, where men and women after clearing the land planted their root crops. The prospect of soon being in his field, a familiar place, beautiful and warm, surrounded by the bushes, the flowers and the large green banana leaves, the wild mimosa, the promise of contact with freshly turned soil, around his ankles, all this filled him with happiness. His happiness reached me, that happiness that I could feel just by exchanging

glances because I was familiar with it myself firstly many years ago, when after my little toes, as if they were pulling me behind them, I completely disappeared between the cement slabs in the yard and now today by the random influence of friendships, I walk through several hundred meters of forest to one of those still-wild gardens.

Text started at Do Kamo at 3 pm

Finished at Galleria at ten past five on 17 09 1999

Nicolas Kurtovitch

Text No 3

Text written light-handedly No 13

Somewhere, hanging from a nail on the side of one of my bookcases, I have a slingshot made by a young man whom I know well. I don't know how he made it and I'd be quite incapable of making it work, but it is very familiar. I often touch it, because of a young man himself who is far away and I miss him and it is almost him, almost his body and also because of the material the slingshot is made from. At the beginning it was a big piece of banyan skin, about 50 cm by 30 in size, but the general shape, although roughly rectangular, wasn't straight in any way. The skin comes from the bark of the roots of the tree and still looks plantlike, with many wrinkles of varying depths like on an old man's face worn by the years; it's neither yellow nor orange, rather a colour in between the two, the possible name of which I do not know. It is not smooth as a piece of silk could be, it is rough as if it had been thrown on the ground after being peeled off dirty from the root and blown on: there is something of this earth still on the skin. I imagine that this is how it got its rough texture but really I don't know. The young man spoke with the young woman who gave it to him for a long time. He wanted to know everything about where it came from, how the root was chosen and wanted to know if it was chance that decided the quality of the material or whether the choice was a very careful one; he also wanted to know everything about the way it was extracted and what she would have wanted to do with it. He wanted to know what people of her clan usually did with them and whether women alone were entitled to prepare the bark to make it look like this. He had so many questions to ask. I did not listen to the answers, they remained alone for two long hours while I contented myself with the shade of the banyan tree.

She must have told him all about it, told him what it was possible to say in such a short time. When he joined me, I understood from his happy face that he knew about the skin, what it was. He knew about the metamorphosis of the banian bark after being cut up and prepared, becoming an almost human skin. The young man knew exactly what he was holding in his hand. His determined attitude, just a few words to tell me, about what had been said in a detached way. No explanation on what he was going to do with it, as if he had no plans. Everything in him suggested that he considered his day as being complete and that he was expecting something quite different during the hours we still had to spend together.

This young man has now gone and left me his slingshot. He has patiently cut in the skin into several strips and from the strips made string, which he has skilfully woven together. To make what I call the palm of the slingshot, a place which resembles the hollow of the hand, where you place the stone you wish to throw, he used a piece 8cm by 2, the smoothest possible one. The really surprising thing is that this part of the whole thing concentrates all my attention on it, all my interest, all the mysterious strength that I grant to this banyan skin, as if I guessed that by uncontrollable magic what had been one of the buried roots, now pulled from the earth and transformed, was going to project into the heavens all the desires and wants of that young man.

Nicolas Kurtovitch