



Inventing a Primitive Mind in New Caledonia: A Missionary Ethnologist at Work

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Abstract. – The encounter of anthropology and psychology in Leenhardt’s controversial construct of the indigenous mind in New Caledonia widely inspired the theoretical development of French colonial psychiatry, entertaining close ties with anthropology, differential psychology, phenomenological psychiatry, and colonial psychiatry. Few ethnologists have had such influence on French colonial psychiatry. This article contributes to highlighting this specific connection by exploring different aspects of the figure and the work of Maurice Leenhardt (1878–1954), a French missionary and ethnologist in New Caledonia over a period of 25 years from 1902 on. [*New Caledonia, Kanak, Maurice Leenhardt, ethnology, psychology, French psychiatry, Kanak mind*]

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Maurice Leenhardt and the Invention of a Kanak Mind in the French Colony of New Caledonia

Maurice Leenhardt (1878–1954), a French missionary and ethnologist, was sent to New Caledonia as a Protestant missionary to evangelise the native Kanak population, an Austronesian population from Southeast Asia which colonised New Caledonia from 4000 B.C. He was to work there as a missionary from 1902 to 1926, and only two later periods of stay, in 1938–39 and 1947–48, were specifically devoted to scientific purposes (Naepels et Salomon 2007). The New Caledonia archipelago, colonised

since 1853, is the antipodes of France and situated in the Melanesian space delineated by Dumont d’Urville in the 19th century as one of the three entities in the Pacific, the other two being Polynesia and Micronesia. It is close to Australia and New Zealand and to several neighbours that have gained independence – Vanuatu, Fidji, and the Solomon Islands. The colonisation of New Caledonia was characterised by its brutality. Once France “gained possession,” the Kanak population were subjected to a series of land seizures. This was accompanied by the establishment of a “native code,” a system of segregation, and a tax regime, that progressively came to define the native population’s status in the colony. It was a labour force of men and children that could be exploited and punished as required, and that, until 1946, was contained inside reserves of smaller and smaller size. While it belongs to the colonial reform movement of the humanist type (de L’Estoile 2007: 28), Maurice Leenhardt’s work is not unconnected with this state of affairs. He occupies a central place in Caledonian ethnology. A self-taught man, Leenhardt produced very dense writings that gained widespread recognition. Until the 1950s, he was virtually the only researcher to have taken an interest in this part of Melanesia. His encounter with Lévy-Bruhl, in 1921, was not the start of his ethnographic career, which should rather be seen as belonging to his early missionary years (Clifford 1987). It originated from his feeling that there was a need to study the “complete psychology” of the Melanesians (Letters to his parents, 1905, quoted by Angleviel, 1994: vi). The contribution of

human sciences appears inseparable from his missionary purpose. He was given great encouragement in his ethnographic work by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss. He was later to succeed to the second as a teacher after Mauss's forced resignation under the Vichy regime. Leenhardt mainly founded his work on linguistics as a reflection of mentality in order to analyse and define Kanak subjectivity. This rather doubtful ethnopsychology, pointing to a radical difference between "primitive and civilised people," is very far removed from the conceptions of Marcel Mauss. The method of ethnographic data collection was also rather unusual, since it was very different from the "participating observation" advocated by Malinowski. Leenhardt mainly collected data in the course of his missionary work and the translation of the New Testament with his Kanak collaborators (Naepels et Salomon 2007). Throughout his work, Leenhardt was to develop a theorisation of the Kanak mind. He was among the few ethnologists to have inspired the psychology movements of his time, having a fairly direct influence on the theoretical developments of psychiatry in New Caledonia. For a better understanding and appraisal of Maurice Leenhardt's work, it is very useful to put the following important aspects into historical context: above all his exchanges with the ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and their reciprocal influence, and also colonial psychiatry, differential psychology, and phenomenological psychiatry.

Leenhardt and Lévy-Bruhl

In Leenhardt's work a close association can be found with the French philosopher and "armchair anthropologist", Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). This author had gained recognition via the publication of "La mentalité primitive" (1922). In 1925, with Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet, he created the Institut d'Ethnologie in Paris university to train professional ethnologists. Lévy-Bruhl devoted six books to the study of the "primitive mind," and, with the concepts of "primitivism," "pre-logical thought," and "mystical thought," he provided tools that were to be used by the colonial administration and both general¹ and colonial psychiatry².

1 Ignace Meyerson, psychiatrist and psychologist referred to Maurice Leenhardt, and Doctor Lévy-Valensi, a psychiatrist from Sainte-Anne Paris Mental Hospital underlined general analogies between the "Primitive Mentality" and psychopathology, using the work of Lévy-Bruhl (1934) and even more widely that of Charles Blondel (1926), as well as many others.

2 Also "primitivism" and "primitive mentality", already wide-

His positions were nevertheless disputed by the French sociology school as well as by anthropology. In 1949, in the chapter "L'illusion archaïque" in his book "Structures Élémentaires de la parenté", Claude Lévi-Strauss makes some harsh criticisms of Lévy-Bruhl's theory of the primitive mind as opposed to modern mentality. Among those to whom this criticism is implicitly addressed are not only Lévy-Bruhl, but also Maurice Leenhardt; it is also explicitly addressed to certain others concerning the analogies between the child, the primitive mind, and the neurotic mind: Freud, Piaget, and also the psychiatrist Charles Blondel who was closely associated with Lévy-Bruhl.

Lévy-Bruhl's theories were revived, reshaped, and adapted by Leenhardt, who can be considered to be his pupil, mentor, and critic. Leenhardt's adhesion to Lévy-Bruhl's theories was not, however, so obvious in the early years, as can be seen in a letter to his parents written before the end of his second stay in New Caledonia (05.24.1914). Leenhardt wrote: "... on finding one day the word *rhè* in a conversation, I was able to follow it on all the way. And then, all the pilous, taboos etc, added up one to another with relentless logic, and I no longer understand what the Sorbonne calls pre-logical."³

I, therefore, intend to explore the postulate of a narrow proximity between Lévy-Bruhl and Leenhardt, although they disagree to some extent with the definition of the primitive mind and its mechanisms, mystical thought for Lévy-Bruhl, mythical thought for Leenhardt. However, both conceptualise the generic psychic functioning of a universal primitive mind. In a letter to Evans-Pritchard (14.11.1934), Lévy-Bruhl defined his project as research "concerning the essential and general characteristics of primitive mentality" (1934: 409). Maurice Leenhardt could also define his work in this way, and for this reason, their work on mind or mentality can be viewed as psychology. Their theoretical proposals really interested psychiatrists and psychologists of their time in the context of tension or ambivalence as to how to define the human mind, between universality and otherness, likeness and difference. It should be stressed that Maurice Leenhardt is not interested in defining a Kanak psychopathology, but in defining a generic personality. His rare notations on Kanak madness refer only to the way in which it is interpreted or treated by traditional society.

spread in colonial psychiatry since the beginning of the last century and developed by the School of Algiers, see Porot (1943: 371 f.).

3 For easier understanding, French quotations are translated into English.

The Ethnopsychology of Maurice Leenhardt

Maurice Leenhardt's ethno-psychological theorisation appears not only in his most famous book "Do Kamo" (1947), but also before and after this book in several articles and in many other notations on psychology pertaining to the mental, cognitive, and emotional functioning of the Kanaks. Up to the present day, frequent recourse to his theories can be noted in writings by psychiatrists working in New Caledonia, who have used the categories theorized by Maurice Leenhardt and taken up by Lévy-Bruhl. I feel authorized to define Maurice Leenhardt's work as "ethnopsychology" since he himself made reference to Wundt's⁴ "psychology of peoples," "It is known that Wundt, in reaction to the introspective nature of the old school psychology, attempted to make the psychology of peoples a science" (Leenhardt 1948: 109).

Broadly speaking, the following (non-exhaustive) aspects of Kanak ethno-psychology as theorized by Maurice Leenhardt can be noted:

- 1) A lack of differentiation from nature: "The Melanesian lives non-determined in the embrace of nature. He is not a part of nature; he is inhabited by it. It is through nature that he knows himself" (1944: 5).
- 2) The concept of participation, developed by Lévy-Bruhl, involving particular features in Kanak cognitive and emotional mental functioning, a blending with the environment, and the perception of a world without a third dimension⁵: "There is no distance between people and things; the object adheres to the subject; unforeseen participations appear in a world that the eye, still unaccustomed to apprehending depth, sees solely in two dimensions" (1944: 5). Or again, "This deficiency in the elementary concepts of space and time in primitive minds is too often forgotten, and more psychological or philosophical explanations are sought for their mentality. But the conceptual impotence of the Melanesians we can encounter today is decreasing as these deficiencies decrease" (1947: 282).
- 3) An identification with nature: "This identification is experienced [by the Melanesian subject], and

not perceived. It prevents him from putting a boundary between the world and himself. It facilitates participations and metamorphoses. It prevents any effort of man to assimilate the experience of his own existence" (1947: 6). In his manner of participating in the mineral, plant, and animal worlds, the Kanak is undifferentiated, and exists in one or the other, without any individual subjective consciousness.

4) A collective being that is not yet a subject: "It is unwarranted to refer to a person in primitive groups where man is a collective being and does not exist without company" (1948: 129); or "The impossibility of a person's individuation characterizes the primitive mentality. Individuation takes place when the primitive person discovers his limits in space, and breaks off his participations which form a truly mythical mode of belonging, and hitherto prevented him from knowing his own outline" (1948: 137). A person can only be conceived of in terms of a dual relationship "He is always an element in a dual system: the nephew and the maternal uncle, the grandfather and the grandson, the father and the son, etc., ..." (1947: 171).

5) A mythical mentality: "Thus the values embodied in the myth are those that infuse life into the reality that is accepted by those who relate to the myth. Identity resides here. It appears to us through all the participations present in the primitive mind. The same man can find himself in his grandfather or in his grandson, his nephew, his homonymous companion, in a tree or an ancestral rock, in a votive plant or an animal, in a mythical being, a totem or a god, in a sculpture" (1947: 117).

6) An absence of distinction between the world and the person: "Thus, the Melanesian projects himself into the world and does not distinguish his external reality from his own psychic experience, or himself from the world. He plays a quasi-cosmic role. His behaviour is thus inspired by a kind of intimacy between the world and himself" (1947: 279). Or a lack of distinction between "the state of life and the state of non-life" (1937: 43), juxtaposed temporalities that the Kanak simultaneously inhabits; an immediate time, the mythical time of "totemic communion" (1937: 49) and the dreamtime which is also a lived-in time. Maurice Leenhardt focuses on the confusion and misapprehensions of the primitive mind.

In the description of a radical otherness, "the native" is seen as remaining completely foreign to whoever is unable to perceive him from the inside".⁶ Leenhardt sets out the foundations of a theory, which he illustrates with the linguistics of Aus-

4 Wilhem Wundt, a German psychologist, created the first experimental psychology laboratory in Leipzig in 1879; he extended his research to collective psychology.

5 The idea of the non-perception of the third dimension and depth in the psychological structure of colonised people is present in Maurice Leenhardt's work; it was also particularly widespread in Africa with various explanations. According to Rakowska-Jaillard (1981), the carrying of young Togolese children on the mother's back hides the space in front of them, thus preventing them from perceiving the third dimension.

6 Marcel Mauss was more than skeptical about concepts of nonindividuation and lack of differentiation: (1960: 335).

tronesian languages (1946b), lengthily developed in "Do Kamo" (1947).⁷ He pursues his exploration of the mental functioning of the Kanak personality through their mythical and sociomythical thinking as the phenomenological foundation of their manner-of-being within the world with its corollaries of prelogical thought, nonrationality, and nonindividuation. Maurice Leenhardt describes the Kanaks as possessing an "archaic mentality" (1952: 285) in a "primitive society"⁸ (1952: 289).

The way in which his ethnological work was received was, however, very variable. James Clifford points to the originality of Leenhardt which resides in his collective work with informers, making him a precursor of dialogic anthropology: "The starting point would not be the anthropologist's interpretative descriptions, but rather those of the informant, considered here in the role of indigenous ethnographer" (1980: 527). In contrast, the French anthropologist Alban Bensa (1995: 261), in association with the work of linguists and a new generation of social anthropologists, distanced himself from Leenhardt's ethnology: "At the time when, in other areas of Melanesia, anthropological study was renewing the discipline, when Malinowski was already extremely famous and widely read, when Hocart published fundamental work on Fiji, when social anthropology had already acquired its titles of nobility, Leenhardt the self-taught ethnologist developed his own missionary, inspired brand of ethnology, in which good ethnological observations often came to be mixed with an evolutionary psychology of the religious conscience."

For the psychologist or psychiatrist, Maurice Leenhardt's theory describing an almost "normal-pathological" Kanak personality to some extent recalls Freud's psychoanalytical analogies and Piaget's genetic developmental psychology, which associate the neurotic subject, the child, and the primitive mind. It is also close to the more sweeping definitions of colonial psychiatry. In this case, the "native" personality is closely related to a form of psychopathology, the normal mind being almost pathological from the outset. This is also to be found in the "criminal personality" of the North African school of Algiers, the dependency complex of colonised peoples for Mannoni (1950) in Madagascar, or the African mind as defined by Carothers.

Leenhardt and Colonial Psychiatry

Maurice Leenhardt, who has much in common with the various theorists of colonial psychiatry, describes a generic "indigenous" personality;⁹ it is nontemporal, and its functioning has normal/pathological psychological characteristics, although Leenhardt does not employ these terms. This leads on to the description of a nonself: a lack of differentiation with the environment, nonindividuation, absence of self-awareness, non-delimitation of the subject's own body, non-perception of the third dimension, etc. Primitive mentality and mythical "thought" are also part of this conceptual system partly inherited from Lévy-Bruhl, and later easily instrumentalised in the theoretical developments of psychiatrists working with Kanak people in New Caledonia.

Maurice Leenhardt claimed that a Kanak does not know if it is his own head or someone else's that he carries on his shoulders: "He is unaware of the limits of his own person ... he does not know to what extent he is himself, or someone else, or if it is indeed his own head that he has on his shoulders" (1946b: xlv). Quotations of this sort from Maurice Leenhardt's work may appear astonishing in the perspective of the influences of Marcel Mauss and the French sociological school, along with the succession of scholars with whom he collaborated. But they do underline the underlying religious project and the need for a theoretical base for the implementation of a "social Christianity." However, it is not inappropriate to underline Leenhardt's ties with colonial psychiatry in his work, which has much in common with Lévy-Bruhl, and which was to lend itself to similar instrumentalisation. We will approach this in several ways, first of all with some historical background and then by concentrating on New Caledonia.

Maurice Leenhardt's theoretical developments resemble those of colonial psychiatry in the English and French-speaking colonial worlds in various ways. Maurice Leenhardt's definitions of the Kanak mind, prior to being completely transformed by evangelisation, have been viewed by some contemporary psychologists as evidencing the characteristics of pathological disorders, regression, or deficiency. There are many quotations from Leenhardt that can illustrate this view of "pathological normal-

7 In connection with "Do Kamo" Michel Naepels (1998) stresses Maurice Leenhardt's particular position in his definition of the "Kanak experience of the world."

8 Adam Kuper explains the long persistence of this theory since the 19th century and its widespread use in ethnology, sociology, psychoanalysis, political sciences, and evangelisation by its irreplaceable "ideological function" (1988: 240).

9 Jean Guiart was critical of a fixed vision of the Kanak person: "Maurice Leenhardt sought how the primitive mind, the object of his perspicacious attention, structured everyday life and society. Emmeshed in the ideas of his time, and aiming for a global explanation, he did not want to identify recognized structures, seeking to describe a Melanesian belonging to all times and to all places" (1964: 197).

ity,” such as: “The nuance separating the word, the act and the object is so small that Kanaks do not make the distinction” (1946a: 89). This statement is close to the definition of abnormality in psychiatry. Thus, although less prejudicial and without the authority of medical and psychiatric status, Maurice Leenhardt’s definitions are quite close to those prevailing during his time in the field of colonial psychiatry, supporting the “pathological normalcy of the natives” (Keller 2001: 315). Their point in common is that they generally demonstrate the psychological superiority of the coloniser over the colonised (with some rare exceptions: such as Frantz Fanon in Algeria or Wulf Sachs in South Africa). According to the conceptualizations of the French School of Algiers, Antoine Porot (1932) underlines the psychopathological predisposition to violence and criminal activity of the North African personality, referring to the “criminal impulsiveness of the Algerian native” (1932) and stating: “From these studies and various isolated observations, one may observe that coarse and caricatural psychoneurotic manifestations are frequent among natives because of their suggestibility and primitive mentality” (1943: 372). Porot, like Carothers for East Africa, claimed there were constitutional defects confirming their pathological normalcy, “[e]pilepsy has been discovered with uncommon frequency in the North-African natives, especially in its mental form ... It very often conditions the native’s particular brand of criminal impulsiveness” (1943: 373).

At this time, colonial doctors exerted a direct influence on the development of a corpus of colonial psychiatry, which had above all an ideological function. With the weight of medical authority, it legitimated the project geared toward colonial violence. For the English colonies, Doctor J. C. Carothers (a general practitioner acting as a psychiatrist) exerted considerable influence in psychiatry in East Africa from the 1930s, including a definition of the “African mind” as having a frontal lobe deficiency in addition to a lack of education, explaining “indigenous inferiority.” Appointed to the World Health Organization in 1954, in one report he produced an interpretation in terms of psychological pathology of the Mau-Mau revolt in Kenya (while in fact it eventually led to this country’s independence).

It is obvious that colonial psychiatry served several purposes, but it missed its target. It specified, conceptualized, and generalized an inferior indigenous mind and personality, legitimizing the colonial project, but doing little to address its true objects: individual psychopathologies, mental illness, and psychological disorders. Similar characteristics are to be found across various generalizing theories, in-

cluding those of Maurice Leenhardt in New Caledonia defining the Kanak mind, the School of Algiers, Carothers for East Africa, or Mannoni in Madagascar. Octave Mannoni’s concepts about Madagascar (1950) tended to set aside the colonial situation and to define an infantile, dependent Malagasy personality, very different from the “European mind”, predisposing to colonisation. Frantz Fanon (1952) was for his part very critical of both Mannoni and the School of Algiers.

It can, therefore, be seen that Maurice Leenhardt’s theses have a lot in common with colonial psychiatry and those inspired by it, by way of their tendency to construct a “pathological normality” of “the native” and the colonised population as a whole. Given his involvement as a missionary turned ethnologist, it might appear unjustified to set Maurice Leenhardt alongside Porot, Carothers, or Mannoni. But we think that he presents many analogies with them: the generous purpose of his missionary pedagogy (seeking to transform Kanak psychology and give it body and self-awareness, thus allowing fast progression through the different stages of human evolution) merely confirms these points in common.

Leenhardt and Differential Psychology

In order to contextualise Leenhardt’s work, it is essential to return to Lévy-Bruhl and to the innovation that his work initially represented. On one hand, Lévy-Bruhl is an indirect successor to Broca’s¹⁰ physical anthropology, which focused only on measurements and required travellers to send back brains and other materials necessary for his project, any other approach being considered eccentric. Lévy-Bruhl was particularly well known by psychiatrists attempting to escape from the fixed categories of alienation by creating a psychiatry entertaining connections with neurology and anthropology. Psychoanalysis was generally quoted only to be refuted. Charles Blondel, a well-known psychiatrist at the time, and a professor of psychology first in Strasbourg, then in Paris, wrote both on psychoanalysis (mostly critical) and on the theories of Lévy-Bruhl.

10 Paul Broca wrote the first handbook on physical anthropology in 1864 with a new edition in 1879 and stated: “Man, however, is not more difficult to observe than a plant or an insect; any doctor, any naturalist, any attentive and persevering traveller can measure and describe him methodically, without being prepared by special studies, because the data to collect relates to external features that anyone can note” (1879: 2); or “We thus draw particular attention to travellers, and European doctors who reside among foreign races, for collecting, preserving and sending us the greatest possible number of brains of the various races” (1879: 16).

He belonged to the innovative trend known as “differential psychology.”

This brought psychiatrists and ethnologists closer together with the concept of the universality of mankind, but inside this whole there were differences, between children and adults, between genders, between the civilised and primitive minds, and also between the mentally ill and the psychologically stable. Thus, Charles Blondel (1926) could well be interested in Lévy-Bruhl’s research, because primitive or prelogical thought in the non-civilised could also prove useful in understanding the differences between thought in the insane and thought in the healthy, or between thought in the primitive mind and thought in the child. In a chronological context, these theories represented some progress. Before World War I, psychiatric research had concentrated on finding the smallest differential element between the normal and pathological mind, with attempts to classify delirious disorders. Paul Serieux and Jean Capgras published a book in 1909 called “*Les folies raisonnantes. Le délire d’interprétation,*” which is a work on differential psychology. On the one hand, the task was to identify differences, but at the same time these differences were slight and it was their excess that constituted the difference rather than the process in itself. In 1911, Gilbert Ballet described chronic hallucinatory psychosis in an article in the review *L’Encéphale*. This was also a step towards differential psychology, which differed from the heredity-based concepts of the time. In Clérambault’s work, there is a chapter on “*Psychoses passionnelles*” with a similar approach. Likewise, there is an example of differential psychology in Ernest Dupré’s “*Pathologie de l’imagination*” published in 1925. These mental health theories were looking for the smallest common denominator between the delirious and the non-delirious mind, emphasizing the fact that there was often a very fine line between the two. This trend differs from other theories of the time, particularly attached to notions of heredity or atavism, such as Lombroso’s (1876) criminal personality or Kretschmer’s morphological typology.

Maurice Leenhardt’s theoretical developments describing the Kanak mind were looking for differential features, showing, on the one hand, universality which makes people receptive to evangelisation, to the Christian message, and to well-managed colonisation, and revealing, on the other hand, other quite different features, making this project particularly difficult, but very necessary. Leenhardt’s missionary work is a pedagogical undertaking aiming to lead the primitive mind to individuation and psychological and physical self-awareness, and to en-

able graduation to moral conscience by means of the Christian message rendered accessible following the translation of the Bible.

Some psychiatrists from the first quarter of the last century sought explanations and help from ethnologists; some of them looked to Maurice Leenhardt. His missionary work led him to try to reconcile the universal and the differentiated mind so as to create a customized Kanak metapsychology of use in his missionary project, nevertheless questioning the colonial set up of which it was part. In this development, Lévy-Bruhl’s role is considerable. By studying primitive people, who were often colonised peoples, Lévy-Bruhl had a share in the same enterprise and could be useful not only to general psychiatry but also to colonial psychiatry, where he could offer his theories for more efficient colonial administration. He wrote in a foreword to Charles Blondel’s book, “*La mentalité primitive*”: “Finally, the colonial powers have understood that the development of tropical countries remains illusory without the active participation of the natives, but this participation depends, in turn, on the knowledge which the administration has of their mentality” (1926: 8), and “[t]here is at the same time today a scientific and political interest of the highest importance in coming as close as possible to primitive mentality” (1926: 9). Maurice Leenhardt can be positioned in this same understanding, albeit paternalistic, vein within the colonial project, in which the spiritual transformation of “the native” goes hand in hand with the civilizing project of colonisation, provided certain excesses are denounced and corrected. Thus, this search for differential psychology on the part of psychiatrists joined forces with ethnological theoretical developments: Lévy-Bruhl and Leenhardt aroused interest. In 1920, Lévy-Bruhl was certainly very interested in meeting Maurice Leenhardt since he could provide him with firsthand elements.

Maurice Leenhardt and Phenomenology in Psychiatry

Maurice Leenhardt’s Kanak ethnopsychology defines a psychological manner-of-being in the world, and for this reason he entertains close connections with phenomenology¹¹ and psychiatric phenomenology. His constant references to Kanak ontol-

11 David Bidney (1973) underlines Edmond Husserl’s interest in Lévy-Bruhl’s work, and in particular his “Primitive Mythology,” which reconstitutes the life experience of the primitive man.

ogy authorize this assumption. Phenomenology¹² is one of the important philosophical and psychiatric movements in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Karl Jaspers introduced the term “phenomenology” to psychiatry in 1913 in his book “Allgemeine Psychopathologie” (General Psychopathology), which was translated into French in 1928. Phenomenological psychiatry had some success, with the extension of existential analysis according to Ludwig Binswanger. The psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski also defined phenomenological psychiatry in France. He tried to define a “fundamental disorder” and a structural manner-of-being in the world: “phenomenology seeks first to determine ‘the ultimate psychopathological fact’, the most psychopathological among them all, and then, after devoting efforts to close examination, defines its essential features” (1948: 177). Many psychiatrists have taken an interest in phenomenological psychiatry, including, more recently, Arthur Tatossian in Marseille (1997). If Maurice Leenhardt makes little reference to phenomenology itself, his attempt to define a Kanak manner-of-being in the world is not foreign to it. It is, in all events, the way he is perceived and interpreted in our own time by the phenomenologist and philosopher Jacques Garelli (1995) or by Georges Zeldine (1981), a psychiatrist working and living in New Caledonia.

Maurice Leenhardt and Colonial Psychiatry in New Caledonia

Maurice Leenhardt was not indifferent to physical anthropology. He had a visit from Fritz Sarazin (1912), a Swiss naturalist and anthropologist who claimed Kanak filiations with the Neanderthal man (see also Sarazin 1924). The ambivalence of Leenhardt on this subject can be rather revealing of his representation of Kanak singularity. In 1930, Maurice Leenhardt was vigorously opposed to this thesis and wrote: “What is more, one recent book on anthropology claims that the skeleton of New Caledonian natives comprises more primitive features than Neanderthal man, and all known fossils of human evolution. Kanaks consequently constitute one of the most primitive branches of humanity today. There you have yet another argument intended to find the reason for the extinction of this curious and obsolete race” (1930: 44). He later adopted the op-

posite position, ratifying Kanak filiations with Neanderthal man: “Dr. Sarazin, who devoted a large volume [to Kanaks] notes: many features in the skeleton are more primitive than those of Australian [aborigines], and even, in some cases than those of the Neanderthal man” (1937: 12).

In the 1970s and 1980s colonial psychiatric practitioners seeking an authoritative ethnological guarantee often used Maurice Leenhardt’s theoretical model of the Kanak mind and “mythical thought.” This generally started from observations by military psychiatrists working at the psychiatric hospital in Noumea (New Caledonia), where mentally ill “natives” were hospitalized. Kanak “mythical thought” and otherness were seen as implicated in a specific “indigenous” psychopathology, allowing conceptualizations of “Kanak madness” (Bourret et Zeldine 1978: 549) or of “Kanak delirious hysteria” (Lachaume 1987: 1251). This psychiatric theorisation, clearly a poor argument, sought to define a specific Kanak psychology making it possible to explain Kanak madness. According to Poinso and Védié, “Europeans in New Caledonia are hospitalized for depressive syndromes, suicide attempts and neurotic conditions. In contrast, Melanesians and Wallisians are mostly hospitalized for acute or chronic psychotic conditions” (1991: 663). This unfavourable diagnostic division, psychosis for the “natives”, neurosis for Europeans, is frequent in the specialized literature (Selod 1998). The authors also explain to us that a translator is useless; this assertion is surprising, especially considering the vitality of the twenty-eight languages spoken in New Caledonia. They also specify that the Kanak culture protects Kanaks from guilt: “The absence of suicide attempts is also a point which we have underlined on several occasions. By its ‘projective’ vision of the origin of diseases, the Melanesian culture does not entertain feelings of guilt, in spite of the influence of the Catholic Church and Protestant missions” (Poinso et Védié 1991: 671). Therefore, the authors (1991: 671) removed Kanaks from the Oedipus complex to which they do not have access: “On the contrary, we think that it is preferable to set the assumption that the neurotic defence mechanisms are too weak to work effectively. This can be explained by tribal education, which sidesteps oedipal triangulation. There are indeed very frequent traditional Melanesian adoptions, and the concept that the ‘breath of life’ actually comes from the brother of the mother, i.e., from the uterine uncle, and not from the father. But the magic, projective thought of *the boucan* seems to us to be a more important predisposing element.” The authors quote the projective disposition according to Haxaire (1985) and

12 French philosopher and psychiatrist Georges Lantéri-Laura wrote (2001: 376): “... We owe to the work of Edmond Husserl the use of the phenomenological attitude; he always starts by describing the facts before seeking to interpret them; ...”

Lachaume (1987): “Another aspect of the Melanesian culture is the facilitation of projective mechanisms in connection with mythical and supernatural thought. For the Melanesian, the supernatural and the mythical are narrowly present in everyday life, without spatial or temporal distance between the supernatural and real worlds. The proximity of these two worlds allows for easy passage from one to the other” (Lachaume 1987: 1256). Psychiatrists thus found an observable psychopathological version of Maurice Leenhardt’s “mythical thought” in a clinical setting, enabling the definition of a specific Kanak psychopathological category.

Although a large part of these writings is the result of the efforts of young psychiatrists finishing up their degrees and staying in the colony for only a short time, the same is not true for other psychiatrists like Georges Zeldine who settled in New Caledonia and had previously worked at the Fann/Dakar psychiatric hospital in Senegal with the well-known French psychiatrist, Henri Collomb, from 1972 to 1974. He advocated an ethnopsychiatric approach, which he suggested associating with “ontological psychiatry” (1982: 973). Concerning African and, even more so, Kanak psychology and society (1981: 146) these psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytical approaches appeared deeply incoherent to him. He returned to Lévy-Bruhl’s “mystical thought” and to Leenhardt’s “mythical thought”. He defined them both in terms of a “transcendental authority” (1977: 1150) or the need of people from traditional cultures for a god or supernatural being. In several articles, he made a vivid plea for the sacred, and challenged Western approaches to madness for its over-simplification the human mind. Zeldine claimed to have tried to “approach the question of cultural otherness in empathetic and lucid mode” (personal comm., January 2001).

Conclusion

Leenhardt’s ethnopsychology is a direct product of his missionary duties, and his scientific project is indeed almost contemporary with the time of his arrival in Caledonia, as seen in a letter to his father on June 28, 1903. In his view, if the Kanak population was to receive the Christian message, this required a transformation of the native mental functioning; this was to occur according to his own representations of acculturation, “that is to say by a shift from primitive mentality to modern mentality” (Keck 2007: 64).

Maurice Leenhardt’s ethnopsychology met with the intellectual currents of his time, but also met

with their contradictions. Phenomenological psychiatry was forgotten, and psychoanalysis is almost nonexistent in Leenhardt’s work. The sociological influence of Marcel Mauss is very slight; differential psychology led to absolute differentialism with the concept of the indigenous mind or the “primitive mentality”. Lévy-Bruhl’s influence on Maurice Leenhardt was crucial, in spite of his attempts at theoretical innovation such as his “mythical thought” that he set against Lévy-Bruhl’s “mystical thought.” He can nevertheless be regarded as a disciple. He followed in the footsteps of Lévy-Bruhl, although more modestly, as a reference for the issues of otherness as posed in general psychiatry, in colonial psychiatry, and in colonial administration. Known as phenomenological or ontological, his approach is nevertheless ambiguous, but gave him the authority to define the Kanak “manner-of-being” in the world, arguing that his long experience enabled him to describe the Kanak mind from the inside. Some of his former students, like the anthropologist George Balandier,¹³ underline their fascination for his experience and knowledge, although they had great difficulties understanding it. The complexity of Leenhardt’s work makes it difficult to define (Naepels et Salomon 2007). We consider that Maurice Leenhardt, because of his proximity to Lévy-Bruhl’s point of view, made the choice of psychological rather than anthropological study. This choice can probably be attributed to his several roles of pastor, missionary, and ethnologist, although another direction was possible, that would have taken him closer to Marcel Mauss. His pastorate thesis on “Ethiopianism” and correspondence from his first few years in New Caledonia suggested a more sociological direction.

Maurice Leenhardt’s conceptualizations had a direct influence on the theorisations of psychiatrists¹⁴ and medical doctors in New Caledonia. They dispensed with the need to explore transcultural and anthropological aspects that might have been relevant for the Kanak population with whom they were to work. Leenhardt’s concepts seem to fill a theoretical vacuum and become part of a lasting fixed theoretical corpus. In New Caledonia, Maurice Leenhardt supported the notion of an almost insuperable Kanak otherness, quite distant from the dialogic anthropology attributed to him by Clifford (1980, 1987). Leenhardt reconstructed the Kanak mind from an abstract puzzle that was very far removed from certain forms of sociology (*la sociologie de*

13 Personal communication, 2001 (Mouchenik 2002a).

14 The work of the author (2002, 2004, 2007) on contemporary psychiatry in New Caledonia can be consulted.

l'action) that might have made Kanak positions and standpoints within a conflict-ridden, competitive society more understandable.

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