

The Homecoming of Atai's Remains

Adriano Favole, Emmanuel Kasarberou, Anna Paini



Introduction

This article tells the story of the request for and return of the remains of Atai, a Kanak *Grand chef* (Great Chief) (**Fig. 1**). These had been preserved in a display case of a Parisian museum for more than 130 years before finally being repatriated to Kanaky New Caledonia. The institutions and legal chicanery involved make this a unique story of restitution. Atai's ghost haunted the country on the eve of the 2018 New Caledonian independence referendum.

The context

New Caledonia is an archipelago in the Melanesia subregion and is composed of a main island known as Grande Terre, the Loyalty Islands (Ouvéa, Lifou, Tiga and Maré), the Belep Islands, the Isle of Pines and a number of minor islands. It was given its name by Captain James Cook, who, during his second voyage on HMS Resolution, moored on the north-eastern coast of the main island on 4 September 1774. Even before their long and dramatic colonial history—which began in 1853 after France took formal possession of the rich (particularly in nickel) archipelago—the islands had been visited by other Europeans, both traders and missionaries. New Caledonia was initially used as a penal colony and only after 1895 as a settlement, although well before that date some former prisoners released for good behaviour had begun putting down roots in Kanak territories.

A rapacious colonial policy took the best land from the indigenous people, and entire clans were moved to less fertile grounds in territories that were not entirely available as they already belonged to other clans. What is more, for the Kanak people land was not merely a source of sustenance, but also a place imbued with a sense of connectedness between the living, and between the living and the dead. The uprooting made maintaining those relationships difficult, giving rise to conflicts between Kanak groups already established on a territory and those forcibly displaced. At the same time the colonial government pressed on with a policy of immigration from Europe, Asia and other French possessions.

The two great Kanak insurrections on Grand Terre—that of 1878 under the leadership of Atai and that of 1917 under the leadership of *chef* Noël et *chef* Bwarhat—were crushed by the army and the settlers. Kanaks were granted citizenship only in 1946, the year in which the *Indigénat* system was abolished.

The political mobilisation for the independence cause in the 1960s and the tensions between the Kanak and the *caldoches* (descendants of European settlers) came to a head in the *événements* of the 1980s. This was a very complex decade that revolved around the charismatic leadership of Jean-Marie Tjibaou and which drew to a close with the signing of the Matignon Accords, a ten-year (1988–1998) agreement aimed at establishing an economic, social and cultural balance between the capital, a “white” town, and the rest of the country populated by the Kanak. The Accords provided for the subdivision of the country into three provinces (North, South and Loyalty Islands). The referendum, scheduled for the end of the decade, did not take place because the Accords were superseded by the Accord of Nouméa (1998), which opened a new political, social and cultural period. Not by chance on the same day that the new agreement was signed the Center Cultural Tjibaou was inaugurated and dedicated to the independence leader killed in Ouvéa ten years earlier.

Having become a French Overseas Territory after the Second World War, the country is currently a “collectivité sui generis” on the eve of the self-determination referendum, which will take place in 2018. It is thus the only part of the Melanesia region that is not yet independent, and which has an indigenous population that constitutes the largest cultural group but is not a majority of the population.

The tumultuous events of Atai and his remains

The genesis of the “Atai affair” came in the mid-1870s, when land colonisation was proceeding at great pace in the central part of Grande Terre (the present-day communities of La Foa, Sarramea and Farino). After being freed from the prison on the south of Nou Island, convicts who demonstrated “good conduct” were transferred into fortified structures further out. They were then assigned plots of land, enabling them to become settlers. In 1878, due to land expropriations but also because of a prolonged drought, a violent revolt broke out during which settlers and gendarmes were massacred and forts and military stations came under attack. At the head of the insurgents, who belonged to various chieftaincies (*chefferies*) of the centre-west of Grand Terre, was Atai, the traditional leader of the territory that is now in the municipality of Sarramea. The French response was ferocious. Having secured the support of chieftaincies on the east coast (now the municipalities of Canala and Houailou), the troops launched a counterattack that culminated on 1 September 1878 in the death of Atai and his advisor Andia (generally described in historical sources as a “sorcerer”). According to Roselène Dousset-Leenhardt (Dousset-Leenhardt 1976), about two hundred French and over a thousand natives died in the revolt, which indicates that it was not merely a local conflict.

There are two main accounts of Atai's death. The first, corroborated by Western sources, speaks of an ambush carried out by French troops with the complicity of “indigenous auxiliaries.” After their deaths, Atai and Andia were decapitated. But according to the second account, that of Alban Bensa (Bensa 2004, 13–46), Atai chose to have himself killed by his warriors. In many Melanesian traditions such a decision is interpreted as an extreme attempt to end conflict and restore peace.

The two accounts are very interesting if seen from the perspective of the recent restitution of Atai's remains: the first provides a narrative of an unresolved conflict between the territory of Canala and that of Sarramea, where Atai lived: a story of betrayal that today would normally require an act of conciliation involving contrition and pardon on the part of the descendants. The second instead presents a “peaceable” version, in which Atai himself put an end to the internecine conflict in the Kanak world.

The heads of Atai and Andia arrived in Paris in Autumn 1879 “dans des boîtes de fer blanc remplies d'alcool phénique (in tins filled with phenolic alcohol)” (Broca 1879, 616), and were officially presented by

Paul Broca, founder of the Société d'Anthropologie (SAP) in Paris, during a sitting of the association (Broca 1879, 616–618). It should be noted that the SAP, and Broca personally, played a hands-on role in transforming the remains. This involved making a cast, peeling the flesh off the heads, extracting the brains, and thus obtaining smooth and clean skulls on which the following words were written: “Atai, chef des Néo-calédoniens, révolté, tué en 1878” and “Sorcier de Atai”. Contrary to its widely disseminated and self-celebratory narrative, the scientific institution not only “studies” and “preserves” (as it still claims today when opposing restitution requests), but in fact manipulates, disarticulates, writes on and largely destroys remains.

Atai lost and found

After Broca wrote his report, the remains were incorporated into the SAP's collection. There are still a number of photographs in existence that document the exhibition of the plaster cast of Atai's face, but in Paris the skulls gradually slipped into oblivion. In New Caledonia, however, the trajectory was just the opposite: Atai's cause lived on, buried and smouldering amid the ashes of colonialism. Then, during the tumultuous 1980s (known as *les événements*), Atai became an icon of the struggle for independence.

But where, in fact, had his remains and those of his companion ended up in the meantime? The SAP's collection of bones had been transferred in 1952 to the National Museum of Natural History (MNHM), situated in the Musée de l'Homme in the Trocadero, but according to the official version the remains of the two revolutionaries could not be found. Only on 1 July 2011 did the weekly *Le Pays* share the news of their “rediscovery” in an article entitled: “ tête d'Atai retrouvée. Elle n'a jamais été perdue” (Atai's head found. It was never lost).

The publication devoted considerable space to a report of the visit by a number of its journalists to Petit Couli, the tribe situated in the municipality of Sarramea whose Great Chief, Berger Kawa, had for some time claimed biological and political descent from Atai and championed the return of his remains. The question of “reconciliation” versus “pardon” was manifest in all its drama and ambivalence. Should the chieftaincies of the east, those of the area around Canala from where Atai's killer hailed, be obliged to ask Kawa, Atai's descendant, for pardon, at least symbolically? Or, in keeping with the version that we heard in Canala, was it Kawa himself who should

seek reconciliation for having unjustifiably made a unilateral request for restitution? And, last but not least, also for being the “political” descendant of a line of great chiefs that originated only after Atai’s death, for in fact the Petit Couli *chefferie* was established in the early 1880s?

“Choses sans maître”

The restitutions were handled within complex juridical and regulatory frameworks but even so involved well-defined collective and, more rarely, individual actors. It would be incorrect to speak of Atai’s restitution to “the Kanak” since the situation was in fact much more complicated than that. On 22 January 2012, eight months after the news of the “finding,” the SAP’s board of directors acknowledged receipt of a request for the return of Atai’s “tête osseuse,” which was inventoried in its collections. The demand came from Great Chief Berger Kawa. While declaring itself “Immediately favourable, in principle, to this restitution,” (Marchal et. al. 2016, 100). the SAP board nevertheless decided to embark first on a period of thorough research and reflection so that it could take place in “the best legal, ethical and scientific conditions.” (Marchal et. al. 2016, 100) The aim was to create a precedent that could serve as a template for future cases and to carry out a comprehensive review of the museum’s osteological collections.

At the time of Broca’s death in 1880 all of the SAP’s collections from the Laboratory and the School of Anthropology were brought together in the Broca Museum, where they remained until 1940. From 1940 to 1952, all the SAP’s materials were placed in storage ahead of their transfer to the MNHN. They included almost 5,000 skulls that were placed in the museum’s craniological cabinets; the remains of Atai and his companion being put in that of “néo-calédoniens.” “From this date to their restitution, the *têtes osseuses* of Atai and his companion never left the anthropological collections of the MNHN entrusted to the Musée de l’Homme.” (Marchal et. al. 2016, 100)

The SAP summons resulted in an important decision. As the “Personne morale relevante du droit privé,” (Marchal et. al. 2016, 101) in 1952 the SAP had entrusted its collection of bones to the custody of the MNHN, but had not relinquished ownership. It could therefore have returned the remains directly to Kawa and the ATAI committee, which had been formed in the meantime. However, this solution would have changed the status of the remains from “private” objects to ones subject to restrictions on account of their being the legal “property” of a public museum.

A legal ploy eventually resolved the problem: the SAP decided to renounce all claims to the property of the remains, which thereupon became—to use the French legal lexicon—“*choses sans maître* (things without an owner)” (Marchal et. al. 2016, 103). At a stroke the MNHN became simply the “*gardien*” of the “*choses sans maître*” and thus, since they were no longer liable to proprietary rights, the remains could be returned to those who had requested them.

Atai's homecoming

The events surrounding the repatriation of Atai saw the involvement of another protagonist, the Customary Senate (*Sénat coutumier*), to which the French government turned to investigate the legitimacy of Kawa's request. This is a body instituted with the Matignon Accords (1988), composed of two representatives for each of the eight customary areas into which the country is subdivided. It is consulted on a wide range of proposals, including on plans relating to the “symbols of identity” of the country (flag, anthem, name, currency), and is the institutional interlocutor between the government and the indigenous population on any type of project relating to “Kanak identity.” This was therefore an institutional step in keeping with the normal run of things.

The juridical chicanery and the favourable judgment of the Customary Senate allowed the French government to agree to the request made by Bergé Kawa, the Great Chief of the district of La Foa/Sarramea (Cîrî) and on 28 August 2014 in Paris, in the presence of the French Overseas Minister, the official transfer ceremony of the remains of Atai and his companion took place. The two heads were shown to Kawa, and other Kanak who had travelled with him from New Caledonia, and then placed in small caskets for their return home. After a few days the two caskets arrived at Tontouta International Airport. An initial welcome ceremony was held there, followed the next day by a ceremony at Petit Couli in the heart of the territory where the revolt of 1878 had broken out (**Fig. 2**). This signalled the start of a period of mourning that in Kanak culture lasts twelve months. While awaiting a dignified burial, the caskets were placed in Petit Couli's *Maison commune* (communal house) next to the *Grande case* (chief's hut) the foremost architectural symbol of Kanak culture. To avoid unauthorised access to the structure, the keys to its three locks were given to different people.

The February 2015 issue of *Le Parole*, the newsletter of the Customary Senate, published an account of a meeting held on 23 September 2014, immediately after Atai's repatriation, from which three resolutions emerged: an invitation to the Customary Council of the Xârâcùù district (based in Boulouparis) to follow the path of reconciliation at different levels of the Kanak community (family, intra- and inter-clanical, chieftaincy and between different chieftaincies); the hope that the "lifting of the mourning" might take place in the land from which Atai came; and finally that he would receive a worthy burial.

In June 2015 Great Chief Kawa explained that the placement of Atai's remains in the *Maison commune* was a temporary move ahead of the construction of a mausoleum dedicated to the great "vieux." The ATAI Foundation, established by Kawa, had in September 2013 placed a stela as the foundation stone of the future mausoleum. The idea was to use modern, climate resistant materials to construct a building in the form of a great hut. The interior would represent the eight customary areas of the country and house a large fresco painted by two female Kanak artists, Yvette Bouquet and Paula Boi, both claiming to be descendants of Atai.

In practice, the planning stage of the construction turned out to be far more complex than expected. The site, chosen for its symbolic value as the home ground of Atai's clan, belongs to a colonist who appears unwilling to give it up for this purpose. Thus the period of mourning was lifted in September 2015 without the matter having been resolved in the meantime. The return of Atai, which at first seemed to be the conclusion of a programme of institutional restitution, all in all without major problems, instead has stirred up old and new local issues, leading to an unforeseen convoluted situation which demonstrates how there is more to consider than the repatriation of the remains. The first question is: who has the right to appropriate Atai and his memory?

The lifting of mourning was also disrupted by two events concerning the building in which Atai's remains were temporarily housed while awaiting burial. In early October Kawa stopped a tourist who was photographing the *Grande case* of Petit Couli without asking permission, as demanded by a nearby road sign. He physically assaulted the tourist and ended up in the Nouville prison, from where he was released on 13 April. In the meantime, an act of very different symbolic importance happened: on the night of 16-17 October 2015 an arson attack completely destroyed the hut.

Who was behind this? One possibility is that the attack came from within the Kanak community, motivated by a rejection of Berger Kawa as the legit-

imate direct descendant of Atai. But the *caldoches* might equally have been responsible, for some feared of the return of the remains of the heroic Kanak warrior, who lives on symbolically in the indigenous population's collective memory. These divisive events were made all the more emotive and problematical by occurring on the eve of the 2018 referendum.

Atai, valiant leader and powerful ancestor

What is behind all this recent interest in Atai? Speaking about his political struggle in the seventies and eighties, a Kanak who followed the two welcome ceremonies explained that during those times the return of Atai had never been on the agenda: "We were not ready to do it [...] at the time I was a militant, we were too wrapped up in the struggle. We did not think that it would be something that would reconcile us. We were fighting for social justice." Priorities, in other words, lay elsewhere. It should, however, be remembered that Father Apollinaire Anova Ataba (1929–1966), who originated from a territory between La Foa and Bourail, in his writings about the 1960s (published in 1984) gave a broad interpretation of the events of 1878 from a Kanak perspective: "We must be proud of our past. We must be proud of our struggles and of our collective victories. The indigenous person must be proud of the man who was the soul of the 1878 revolt: the Great Chief Atai. We must see him as a symbol, the 'embodiment' of the one who must be the model in the construction of their country." (Ataba 1984, 46). In Ataba's analysis, the figure of Atai is reinterpreted in the light of the liberation movement of the 1960s, making him "an emblematic figure of the liberation of the Kanak people" (Bensa 2004, 26).

While on the one hand Atai is a strong symbol that has accompanied all of the Kanak's moments of struggle, the question of his repatriation was, on the other hand, a more recent one. As the newsletter of the Customary Senate recalled, it was only in 2003 that the institution sent a dossier to the relevant French minister to formally request the "repatriation of the relics of Great Chief Atai."

This is where the intricate question of memory comes into play, the question of the strong symbol that Atai still represents. Who has the right to appropriate the great "elder" and his memory? There is no doubt that Atai and his exploits have always been of great symbolic value in the collective heritage of the Kanaks. Perhaps when the great "vieux" was kept in the display case of a museum he remained a symbol but a distant and therefore

deactivated one; once back home he reassumed the qualities of a powerful and even (for some) dangerous ancestor.

But can Atai now become a symbol of reconciliation? In an attempt to draft an initial response, I borrow the words of Rock Apikaua, a Kanak priest of the Isle of Pines, who wrote *Le prêtre et le juge* (2014), prompted by the questions of the judge and friend Jean-Paul Briseul on the need to request the return the head of the Great Chief. He replied: “I believe it is important that the story of Atai enters into the history of New Caledonia, the story that will be taught to our children, to all our children.” And, “I hope that these places, the place where [Atai] fell in La Foa, and the village where he was born at the entrance of Farino, become places of remembrance for Caledonians” (Apikaoua, Briseul 2014, 62).

The period after the restitution is one to which we should pay close attention.

Notes

¹ This article is the result of a common interest of three authors in New Caledonia, and of converging research on the subject of the restitution of Atai. Adriano Favole, an anthropologist, is particularly interested in issues relating to the heritage, food and political transformations of New Caledonia. Emmanuel Kasarhérou directed the Tjibaou Cultural Centre for a long time and currently works for the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. Anna Paini has carried out ethnographic research, in particular in Lifou, taking an interest in the world of Kanak women, and questions concerning colonialism and cultural heritage. Although the fruit of a joint effort, the writing of the article was divided as follows: Introduction and section 1, E. Kasarhérou; Sections 2, 3 and 4, A. Favole; Sections 5 and 6, A. Paini. The Italian version of this article was published in *Contemporanea* as part of the “Confronti” section edited by Maria Teresa Milicia and Elena Canadelli (Favole, Kasarhérou and Paini 2017).

² The country opted again for independence.

³ The term *chefferie* (*chieftaincy* in English) refers to a form of political organisation centred around traditional “chiefs”. We do not use this term in a rigid and ahistorical way: on the contrary, *chefferies océaniques* are markedly dynamic and have notable regional and internal variations.

⁴ In relation to this, see Ataba 1969, 210–218 and A. Saussol, *L'insurrection de 1878*, in Saussol 1979, chapter 7.

⁵ The term “tribe” is widespread in New Caledonia (there are even road signs indicating “tribe de”). This refers to the Kanak inhabitants, usually coinciding with the “*reserve*” created during the nineteenth century by the French administration.

⁶ Relating to the skull and jaw, the SAP uses the expression “*tête osseuse*” to define the two human remains belonging to Atai and his advisor.

⁷ Among the international partners there was also the *conseil coutumier* of the area Xârâcùù.

⁸ See: <https://caledosphere.com/2016/03/25/berge-kawa-senat-coutumier-se-plaint->

[procureur/](https://www.lnc.nc/article/pays/justice/berge-kawa-libere-apres-trois-semaines-de-prison) and [https://www.lnc.nc/article/pays/justice/berge-kawa-libere-apres-trois-semaines-de-prison.](https://www.lnc.nc/article/pays/justice/berge-kawa-libere-apres-trois-semaines-de-prison)

⁹ Interview by A. Paini with Sophie V., Drueulu, May 2015.

¹⁰ *La parole, Journal d'information du Sénat coutumier de Nouvelle-Calédonie*,

<http://www.senat-coutumier.nc/le-senat-coutumier/nos-publications/la-parole>, 2015, 21: 6.

Bibliography

- Ataba, Apollinaire Anova 1969. "L'insurrection des néo-calédoniens en 1878 et la personnalité du grand chef Atai." *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 25: 201-219.
- 1984. *D'Atai à l'indépendance*, Nouméa: Edipop.
- Apikaoua Roch and Jean-Paul Briseul 2014. *Le prêtre et le juge*, Saint-Pierre, Île de La Réunion, le corridor bleu éditions.
- Bensa, Alban 2004. "Présentation." In *1878, Carnets de campagne en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, précédé de *La Guerre d'Atai, récit kanak [par Téa Henri Wênêmuu]*, edited by M. Millet. Toulouse: Anacharsis.
- Broca, Paul 1879. "Têtes des deux Néo-Calédoniens. Atai et le sorcier." *Bulletins de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* 2: 616-618.
- Dousset-Leenhardt, Rosèlène 1976. *Terre natale, terre d'exil*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.
- Favole, Adriano, Kasarherou Emmanuel and Anna Paini 2017. "Il ritorno di Atai." In "Il grande laboratorio dell'umanità: il dibattito sulla repatriation dei resti umani tra storia e antropologia" edited by M. T. Milicia and E. Canadelli. *Contemporanea* XX, 1: 109–146, 132–140. DOI: 10.1409/85982.
- Marchal, François, Nivart Anne, Fort Aurelie, Ardagna Yann and Grimaud-Herve Dominique 2016. "La restitution des têtes osseuses d'Atai et de son compagnon." *Bulletin et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* 1–2: 100–105.
- Saussol, Alain 1979. *L'héritage: essai sur le problème foncier mélanésien en Nouvelle-Calédonie*. Paris: Société des océanistes.