

Environmental violence and crises of legitimacy in New Caledonia

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This paper addresses the question of what factors besides resource abundance or scarcity play crucial roles in conditioning resource-related violent conflict, by investigating the responses of residents of villages near a mining project in New Caledonia to Rhéébù Nùù, an indigenous environmental protest group. An overlooked and yet crucial factor in local support for Rhéébù Nùù was a lack of faith in the government and, more fundamentally, in the democratic system through which representatives were elected. Instead, villagers put their faith in a revitalization of customary authority. Thus, environmental violence is not driven simply by resource abundance or scarcity; in this instance, it masked a crisis of political legitimacy, grounded in a history of opposition to the colonial power. This leads to the paper's second question: What constitutes a basis for political legitimacy, and how is this legitimacy – and its contestation – mediated by socio-cultural concerns? This study suggests that legitimacy requires the achievement of three elements: representation of people's interests, coherence with cultural identity, and popular acceptance of methods used to exert power. The protest group was more successful at achieving these elements of legitimacy, and thus the support of the local residents, than was either the government or the mining company. However, not all community members felt that Rhéébù Nùù indeed had the support of customary authority, and many disagreed with the group's violent tactics. Thus, protest groups may be subject to the same criteria of legitimacy as the governments or other bodies that they oppose.

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Introduction

On the night of April 1st, 2006, a group of indigenous Melanesians, armed with heavy chisel-ended iron bars, rocks and Molotov cocktails, illegally entered a mine site in New Caledonia where they seized vehicles and materials. Destroying equipment and infrastructure, they dug trenches and set up barriers made of cars and burning tires, blocking access to the site. The following morning, they were joined by 100 more activists as well as 200 gendarmes who released teargas on the activists and fired on a pick-up truck that was charging at them. Forty-eight hours later, four gendarmes had been injured, 16 people had been arrested, over one billion FCFP (approximately \$US 13 million) of damage had been caused to the mining company's equipment, and activities at the site had been halted for two days (Lepot, Ribot, Serre, & Béligon, 2006a, 2006b; Ragaj, Doucet, & Sorlin, 2006). Negotiations began between company officials and activists while the company partially suspended work at the site. Meanwhile, about 70 supporters remained

at a temporary base camp on the side of the road, haranguing employees on their way to work. On the morning of April 18th, they set up another road block, at which point 120 gendarmes stormed in, destroying barricades, scattering protestors, and arresting an additional 20 people (Doucet, 2006).

Many studies have examined relationships between natural resources and civil conflict. Authors within the "environmental security" school argue that resource scarcity, defined as a dearth of (mainly renewable) resources, can play a role in civil unrest or hostilities between nations (Homer-Dixon, 1994: 26). Proponents, such as Thomas Homer-Dixon, also recognize "intervening" (1991: 87) or "contextual" (Homer-Dixon & Blitt, 1998) factors that influence the likelihood of violent responses to resource stress. Similarly, Günther Baechler (1998) emphasizes that the "conflict potential" of environmental degradation is conditioned by "socio-political factors" such as the marginalization of social groups and unmet expectations for economic development, as well as ethnic tensions. However, such theoretical conclusions have been criticized (e.g. Hartmann, 2001; Peluso & Watts, 2001a) for, inter alia, failing to consider in adequate depth the dynamism and complexities of the politico-economic and socio-cultural conditions that contextualize environmental violence – in other words,

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its political ecology. Others, within the “resource curse” school, argue instead that an abundance of high-value natural (mainly non-renewable) resources can result in conflict, through a variety of mechanisms. For one, natural resource wealth often leads to excessive dependence on primary commodities, which are subject to price shocks and thus lead to unstable economic growth, making the nation more vulnerable to civil conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005). Meanwhile, the rents generated by the export of resources – especially oil – can lead to “greed-motivated” insurgencies (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004: 589). This income can also allow governments to have weaker state structures and to be less accountable to their citizens (Karl, 1997: 61), which may fuel discontent among the constituency. Scholars disagree, however, as to whether or when natural resources are in a causal relationship with civil conflict. Some have found that at low quantities they increase the risk of war while at high levels they actually decrease it (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998), and others postulate that the “causal arrow” may run in the opposite direction, with civil war destroying the manufacturing sector and forcing countries to rely on natural resource exports (Ross, 2004b: 338). Some authors even try to specify which – or disagree about whether – particular commodities are linked to the onset or duration of conflict (see Ross, 2004a: 46).

Even when accepting the results of studies that use statistical methods, however, some scholars discount the value of broad correlations that cannot elucidate the reasons behind the outbreak of violence in any particular instance and thus have limited policy value (Ballentine & Sherman, 2003a; Di John, 2007; Le Billon, 2001). In other words, in lieu of a simple, linear, universal relationship between commodity and conflict, multiple, interlinked social variables regulate the formation and expression of responses to resource-related opportunities and constraints (see Watts, 2004). These variables are particular to each location; thus, to understand them requires a close analysis of “site-specific” conditions “rooted in local histories and social relations” (Peluso & Watts, 2001a: 5). A recognition of the importance of considering the role of local particularities in resource-related tensions has led some scholars to call for the abandonment of simplistic, deterministic cause-effect theories and to advocate “the case study and comparative political economy approach” in order to focus on “historically specific processes of conflict/cleavages in a given society” (Di John, 2007: 980; see also Ballentine & Sherman, 2003b; Peluso & Watts, 2001b). Such an approach can allow insight into the multitude and diversity of forces that influence environmental conflicts, and thus lead to the development of richer, more nuanced theories.

One area that remains “seriously under-theorized” is the study of “the ways that environmental violence reflects or masks other forms of social struggle” (Peluso & Watts, 2001a: 6): the underlying or tangentially related tensions within societies that figure, often invisibly, in resource-related conflicts, modulating and shaping these (see, e.g. Banks, 2008; Horowitz, 2002; Turner, 2004; Watts, 2004). An investigation of why some people engage in or support violent protest while others oppose this behavior, and ways that this heterogeneity is related to other intra-community tensions, can give us a better understanding of the reasons why environmental conflict arises, and potentially how it might be prevented. Such an examination can be approached through what has been termed “micropolitical ecology” (Horowitz, 2008; Jewitt, 2008). In response to criticism that political ecology suffered from a “macrostructural bias” (Moore, 1993: 380), scholars from the mid-1990s onward began to focus more on “the ‘micro-politics’ that informs environmental conflict and cooperation at the local level” (Bryant & Bailey, 1997: 24), applying an “actor-oriented” (Giddens, 1976, 1979; Long, 1992), ethnographic approach while still maintaining an appreciation for the broader politico-historical, economic and social forces influencing environmental issues.

This paper takes a micropolitical ecology approach to the question of what hidden tensions may shape environmental conflicts by investigating why residents of villages near a mining project in New Caledonia supported or opposed Rhéébù Nùù, an indigenous environmental protest group that targeted the mining project. Multiple, site-specific variables interacted to influence people’s decisions about whether or not to approve of the protest group’s violent actions. Concerns about the mining project’s potential to cause environmental degradation and about the possibility that it would fail to bring significant economic benefits to the community were important. However, an overlooked and yet crucial factor in local support for the protest group was a lack of faith in the government and, more fundamentally, in the democratic system through which representatives were elected. Thus, this instance of environmental violence “masked” a deeper social conflict, a crisis of political legitimacy. Local understandings of legitimacy were strongly influenced by beliefs about customary forms of representation as well as memories of the recent history of New Caledonia’s relationships to its colonizer, France. Without directly challenging the government’s right to rule, both the mining company and the protest group attempted to capitalize on the strength of an alternative form of governance, the customary authority system. However, the mining company did so by forging friendships with two local leaders, both of whom passed away in 2004; in this leadership vacuum, they were left without a firm ally in the villages near the mine site. The protest group, meanwhile, continued to assert its ties to customary authority, which represented a type of resistance to formal governance structures. However, it suddenly began to use violent means that some villagers believed would never have been condoned by their late chiefs. Therefore, not all community members felt that Rhéébù Nùù itself possessed the legitimacy that the government lacked, demonstrating that the criteria for achieving legitimacy may be applied not only to governments but also to the groups that oppose them.

While numerous studies in the field of political science have been unable to establish a relationship between legitimacy and total “system breakdown”, they have found that a decline in a government’s legitimacy can fuel protest (Booth & Seligson, 2005), as my case study corroborates. This paper breaks new ground, however, in taking a finer-grained look at meanings of “legitimacy” and a broader look at the applicability of this concept to other groups besides formal governing institutions. The present paper thus addresses two questions. First, as contextualized above, what factors besides resource abundance or scarcity may play crucial roles in conditioning resource-related violent conflict? My case study indicates that a government’s lack of political legitimacy can lead its citizens to look to another group for leadership in the face of a threat stemming from resource exploitation, but that not all community members may ascribe legitimacy to this alternative body. This begs a second question: What constitutes a basis for political legitimacy, and how is this legitimacy – and its contestation – mediated by socio-cultural concerns?

Crisis and opportunity

Scholars from a variety of fields have examined the question of political legitimacy. Political scientist David Easton (1965, 1975: 437) defines legitimacy as a sense that it is “right and proper” to respect the authorities and abide by their rules (1965: 278). Easton (1965) further subdivides legitimacy into three categories: “ideological legitimacy”, the perceived validity of a government due to its moral underpinnings; “structural legitimacy”, based on an acceptance of the rules or norms by which authorities acquire and exercise political power; and “personal legitimacy”, which indicates a willingness

to trust and follow individual authorities because of their personal qualities. Political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (1963: 77) places the ability to create such respect, as well as the burden of doing so, with the government itself, defining legitimacy as “the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society”. Other political theorists have noted the importance of legitimacy for political stability, as governments perceived as less legitimate experience higher degrees of protest (Booth & Seligson, 2005). A loss of legitimacy may stem from a sense that the authorities are corrupt (Mainwaring, 2006: 22; Seligson, 2002), which can entail a decline not only in citizens’ faith in individual leaders (their personal legitimacy) but in the moral authority of the administration as a whole (its ideological legitimacy).

Through careful ethnographic studies, political ecologists have examined both successful and failed attempts to construct and maintain legitimacy. Much of this research emphasizes the importance of legitimacy in encouraging people to comply with regulations (e.g. Kull, 2002; Pavri & Deshmukh, 2003; Robbins, 1998), as well as the dangers for a leader’s or government’s stability of failing to establish or maintain such legitimacy (e.g. Gezon, 2006; O’Lear, 2007). Others address ways that legitimacy may be achieved. Legitimacy exists, of course, in the eye of the beholder, and may rely upon citizens’ internalization of a moral code or belief system (e.g. Neumann, 2001; Sundar, 2001) – Gramsci’s (1992) “cultural hegemony”. Alternatively, legitimacy may be built through reference to pre-existing beliefs, desires, and social structures.

One way for governments and other powerful agencies, including development practitioners (Kull, 2002) and multinational mining companies (Banks, 2008), to maintain legitimacy is by representing, to an acceptable degree, people’s own constructions of their interests, such as economic necessities (O’Lear, 2007), even if this entails putting aside long-held ideologies (Kull, 2002). Reference to customary or spiritual authority systems may also play a role. Political legitimacy may be based on long-standing forms of governance, often backed by religious beliefs and rituals: Weber’s (1978 [1956]: 215) “traditional authority”, which carries as much weight in “modern” as in “customary” societies (Leach, 1977: 7). Such moral legitimacy may be conferred upon politicians by guardian spirits (Wittayapak, 2008), or by religious leaders or institutions, even if the latter establishments have become corrupt (Kent, 2006), or it may simply inhere in traditional structures themselves. Adherence to this customary authority system in turn, and particularly in the post-colonial era, becomes intertwined with notions of cultural identity, such that claims to membership of a particular ethnic group may rely upon expressions of loyalty to its customary leader (e.g. Gezon, 2006: 77; Lambek & Walsh, 1997). Following in the footsteps of colonial powers, post-colonial governments (Horowitz, 1998) and international development agencies (Ribot, 1999) often try to establish their own legitimacy by forging strong ties to customary authority structures.

In the absence of legitimacy, governments may turn to force as a means of ensuring the compliance of the populace (e.g. O’Lear, 2007: 220). Ironically, they may also resort to coercive action in order to prevent protest groups from undermining their legitimacy (Nagengast, 1994). External sources of power, brought by mining wealth (Watts, 2004) or foreign capital (Kent, 2006), may also challenge and even obviate traditional sources of legitimacy by enabling governments, or rebel groups, to exert far superior force. Legitimacy and force may therefore be seen as complementary means of maintaining social order or achieving political goals. However, force also intersects with legitimacy in important ways. David Riches (1986: 3) defines violence as “illegitimate” force, indicating that which actions are labeled violent depends on the

speaker’s beliefs about who possesses legitimacy. Furthermore (1986: 6), he explains that the legitimacy of actions that cause harm to others can be defended through reference to the “unimpeachable necessity” of stopping the objects of the forceful actions. However, this necessity will inevitably be disputed, making violent action a subject of “contested legitimacy” (1986: 9). Meanwhile, force may be masked through reference to legitimacy, as when governments relocate communities with their “consent” and for “a greater moral purpose”, while relying on intimidation and the implicit threat of force to achieve their goals (Neumann, 2001).

The present paper investigates the creation of, and challenges to, political legitimacy through a case study of an indigenous environmental protest group in New Caledonia. This island nation provides a particularly apt site for investigation of issues related to the legitimacy of government institutions and grassroots organizations. There, multinational mining companies step into a context of historical resistance to colonial oppression, alongside the persistence of customary authority structures which have long posed a counterweight to formal systems of governance. While it possesses abundant mineral resources, New Caledonia does not rely on mining revenue; instead, its economy is heavily “assisted” (Freys, 1995) through massive transfers of public funds, which swelled from 15% of gross domestic product in the 1960s to 50% in 1987 (1995: 203; see also Horowitz, 2004). Despite the fact that the nation’s wealth does not depend upon its abundant natural resources, a multinational project has sparked violent protest there, indicating that “environmental scarcity” and “resource curse” models may not tell the whole story.

Eye of the country: Rhéebù Nùù and New Caledonia

New Caledonia is a Melanesian archipelago (Fig. 1) administered by Metropolitan France. The population of approximately 231,000 (INSEE-ISEE, 2004) is comprised of several ethnic groups: Melanesians, known as Kanak, comprise 45% of the population, and people of European origin make up 34 percent; the other 21% is comprised largely of Asians and Pacific Islanders (ITSEE, 2001). Sixty percent of the population is concentrated in the capital, Nouméa, where most members of non-Melanesian ethnic groups reside, while rural areas are almost entirely peopled by Kanak.

In Kanak society, the first clans to occupy an area have the customary right to determine land use at that site (Bensa & Rivierre, 1982). In the pre-colonial era, they would appoint the chief of the local resident group, whose “authority is constituted not at all of legal fear, but of a very respectful brotherly affection” (Leenhardt, 1937: 149, 1980 [1930]). However, this position acquired greater significance after 1898, when the French colonial administration began to distribute the title of “chief” to loyal Kanak (Naepels, 1998). Indeed, the colonial administration had a huge impact on every aspect of Kanak society. Soon after annexation in 1853, Kanak started being placed onto reserves, often the lands of long-standing enemies, in order to make way for colonists’ cattle and mining activities. As of 1946 they were allowed freedom of movement and released from compulsory labor, but were still largely excluded from political and economic opportunities. Resentment grew until, in the early 1970s, militant, nationalist, anti-colonialist political parties formed (see Freys, 1995: 26; Henningham, 1992: 66). Many of these groups united under the rubric of the anti-capitalist Parti de libération kanak (Palika) in 1976 (Freys, 1995: 27). In 1984 the coalition of pro-independence parties, Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS), boycotted the election (Howard, 1991: 152–155). This action, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, signaled the start of a series of violent uprisings (see Henningham, 1992: 82–116). The years of bloodshed, known as “les Événements” (the Events), ended in 1988 with the Matignon Accords. This agreement was signed by

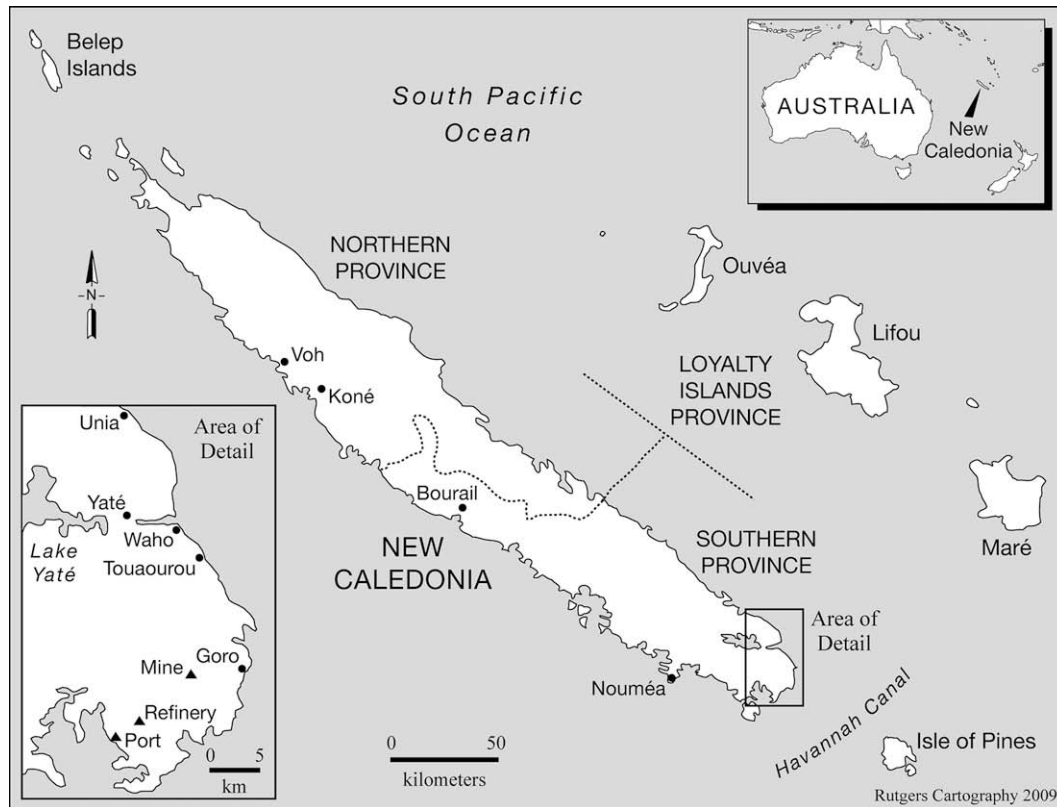


Fig. 1. New Caledonia in the South Pacific.

Tjibaou and Jacques Lafleur, one of the wealthiest men in New Caledonia and the leader of the loyalist *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République* (RPCR). With the aim of redressing the nation's ethnically-based economic imbalances, the text of the accords promised restitution of customary lands, promotion of Kanak culture, preparation of a future New Caledonian elite, and initiation of rural development activities, and also made provisions for another referendum in 1998. It redrew provincial boundaries – but still left much of the territory's wealth under the control of New Caledonians of European origins (Howard, 1991: 159).

A referendum promised in the Matignon Accords took place in November 1998, when voters gave an overwhelming (71.87%) approval to the Nouméa Accord, which acknowledged that the seizure of New Caledonia in 1853 had not taken into account the Kanak people and their “special link to the land.” It also initiated legislative changes to allow for greater expression of Kanak identity. Additionally, the accords made provisions for a gradual devolution of administrative authority to the territory, which was recategorized as an “overseas country” (*pays d'outremer*) in 1999, although still a French possession. One power transferred to New Caledonia was that of drafting mining regulations, while the provinces were given the responsibility of enforcing them (paragraph 3.2.5. of the Nouméa Accord). More training and economic development programs were also promised. A new referendum would be held in fifteen to twenty years' time.

Part of France's interest in retaining a presence in New Caledonia revolves around the archipelago's mineral resources. Grande Terre, the main island, is estimated to possess nearly 25% of the world's nickel reserves (*Mining Journal*, 1999) and is the second largest producer of ferronickel, with 143,000 metric tons produced in 2004, and the fifth greatest source of nickel ore (Lyday, 2006). Mine sites are scattered across Grande Terre. New

Caledonia currently possesses only one nickel refinery, located near Nouméa, which uses pyrometallurgical technology, but two refineries are planned for the near future. The more advanced project, which has attracted far more controversy, is Vale Inco Nouvelle-Calédonie, known at the time of my 2006 fieldwork as Goro Nickel, located in the south of Grande Terre. Inco, a multinational nickel mining company based in Canada, purchased mining rights to the Goro site in 1991. In 1999 they completed a pilot refinery and in 2000 announced their intentions to construct an operational refinery; due to the low mineral content of the soils, the refinery would use hydrometallurgical technology. This procedure, which had never before been implemented in New Caledonia, involves the use of acid under pressure (rather than heat, as with pyrometallurgical technology) to leach nickel and cobalt from the ore. The resulting effluent, containing additional dissolved metals, would be discharged into the nearby lagoon through a pipeline. In 2006 Inco was purchased by CVRD, a Brazilian multinational mining company, which in 2007 changed its name to Vale. Vale representatives have announced their intentions to proceed with the project (Ribot, 2007), with plans to complete a fully operational refinery in 2009.¹ The villages closest to the mine site are Goro (population 257), about 2 km away; Touaourou (population 461), roughly 5 km away; Waho (population 271), about 6 km, and Unia (population 806), approximately 10 km from the mine (ISEE, pers. comm. June 2006).

In the early 2000s, local residents and grassroots organizations (GROs) began to express increasing concerns about potential environmental and social impacts from the project. A protest group specifically targeting Goro Nickel, known as *Rhéébù Nùù*, or “eye of the country” in the indigenous language of Numèè, was formed. The group is led entirely by Kanak but has support from

environmental GROs based in Nouméa, united under the umbrella group Committee for Defense of the South (Coordination de défense du Sud), and non-governmental organizations in Australia, Canada and France, as well as an international citizen support base maintained, in part, through its website. Rhéébù Nùù members have expressed concerns about the project's potential environmental impacts, particularly on the marine resources upon which the local population depends for subsistence and livelihood. They are also concerned that Kanak will not benefit adequately from employment with the project, due to the company's bringing workers from the Philippines for the construction phase. They have stated that their main goals are to halt the project long enough to allow further environmental impact assessments to be performed, and to put in place a Heritage Fund (*fonds patrimoine*) for the Kanak people, supported by a percentage of mining profits from all companies operating in New Caledonia.

Starting in 2002, Rhéébù Nùù has initiated a series of actions targeting the mining project. These actions have ranged from the peaceful, such as the distribution of pamphlets denouncing Inco's activities, the holding of public meetings at local villages, and open letters sent to political leaders, to legal action in the courts, to blockades of the construction site which have turned into violent encounters with armed police, as described above. Rhéébù Nùù works closely with another organization, the Indigenous Committee for Natural Resource Management (Comité autochtone de gestion de ressources naturelles, or CAUGERN), created in 2005. CAUGERN argues that the Kanak, as New Caledonia's indigenous people, with rights to the land and its resources, should be compensated for 130 years of mining companies' enrichment at the expense of local people's ecosystems and livelihoods. The group regularly organizes marches, demonstrations and strikes in New Caledonia.

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

While I have conducted fieldwork in New Caledonia for over a decade, the specific results within this paper are based on data collected from June to September 2006. During this time, in addition to interviewing mining representatives and government officials, and attending public meetings in Nouméa, Unia and Goro, I conducted semi-structured interviews in French with 52 local residents at Goro, Waho and Unia about the mining project and Rhéébù Nùù. I used purposive, snowball sampling (Bernard, 2002) in order to speak with members of the various groups involved: adherents and opponents of Rhéébù Nùù, mining company employees and fishermen, women and men, youth and senior citizens, customary authorities as well as people with a low customary social status. All interviews were conducted in French and all translations from them are my own. I have substituted pseudonyms for the names of all villagers mentioned in the text below.

People's feelings about the project

Local residents had mixed feelings about the mining project. On one hand, nearly everyone was in favor of the employment opportunities that the project represented. Those who were not interested in working for the mining company themselves often hoped that their children would find employment there. Even those who sympathized with Rhéébù Nùù explained that they were “not against the jobs at the mine” (Karine Wû-waayé, pers. comm. July 31, 2006). However, many were concerned that the provision of employment would be inadequate for several reasons: There would simply not be enough work for everyone in the area; many jobs, particularly the longer-term ones, would require a higher level of education than that possessed by the vast majority of local residents; and the company had begun to bring over large numbers of Filipino workers who, local people claimed, were performing unskilled labor.

Even if significant levels of employment could be provided, not everyone was confident that this could compensate for the environmental and social disruption that they expected the project to entail. Indeed, nearly everyone with whom I spoke – whether or not employed by the project – was concerned about its environmental impacts. Many worried that the pollution might have implications for human health, either in present or future generations.² They were also very anxious to preserve their marine resources, which represented a reliable source of income, both in the short term for those who would not find work with the mining project and in the long term for the entire community. Loss of biodiversity such as the whales who passed by on their annual migrations and destruction of the landscape's esthetic qualities were other concerns. Community members worried that such negative effects on humans, animals and landscapes might result from soil erosion from the open-cut activities and air pollution from the refinery's stacks, but they worried particularly about the acid involved in the hydrometallurgical procedure to be used in refining the nickel ore. Villagers were especially concerned about what was popularly known as “the pipe” (*le tuyau*), the pipeline that would transport effluent containing waste products, including dissolved metals, into the ocean.

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

Crisis of representation

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

The government's lack of personal and ideological legitimacy

According to these villagers, the government's unwillingness to perform its duties translated into negligence vis-à-vis the mining project's negative impacts. The government was guilty of "letting things happen" (Roger Iyixéé, pers. comm. July 31, 2006), such as allowing Inco to get away with displaying a lack of respect for local people's rights and failing to consider the environment. Part of this negligence was due to a lack of protective legislation, making New Caledonia an "ideal place" for Inco to conduct business (Roger Iyixéé, pers. comm. July 31, 2006). Several villagers expressed the belief that such a polluting refinery would not be built in a "civilized country" or anywhere that European or international norms were applicable, or an adequate legislative framework was in place. Local residents saw this lacuna as a sign of feebleness on the part of the government: "This [environmentally irresponsible mining] is not done in Europe, why is it being done here? It's not done in Canada. They're doing it here because here the government is too weak" (Thomas Kábwi, pers. comm. August 8, 2006).

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

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

Indeed, the Nouméa Accords of 1998 had specified that New Caledonia's mining legislation, much of which still dates from the 1950s, should be revised and updated, starting with a document (*schéma minier*) outlining the main principles to be addressed. The Accords stipulated that this outline document should be completed by 2004; by the time of my fieldwork in 2006, however, it was still making slow progress due to the difficulties of grappling with such a politically sensitive topic.³ Moreover, the social impacts of mining would not be directly addressed in this (or any) legislation, as made clear to me by the government representative supervising its drafting, who scoffed, "That's not my department" (pers. comm. June 26, 2006), and another official who chuckled, "You're engaging in a 21st century thought process – we're just trying to get out of the 19th" (pers. comm. August 30, 2006).

The Matignon and Nouméa Accords had also promised economic readjustment to redistribute wealth from the Southern Province, largely populated by people of European ancestry, to the Northern Province, mainly populated by Kanak. Many people had high hopes that the Northern Province's Koniambo Project, a joint venture between multinational Falconbridge (purchased by Xstrata in November 2006) and the local, Kanak-run company, SMSP, would help to achieve such a redistribution (Horowitz, 2004). This project included plans for a refinery using the more familiar pyrometallurgical technology. Many people were concerned that the Goro Nickel project, while potentially benefiting Kanak residents of the Southern Province, would jeopardize the more far-reaching political goal of redistributing wealth to the Northern Province. One villager in the Goro area noted that "here people expect a lot from economic development" but, in spite of this,

suggested "giving priority to the [refinery] in the north" (Ernest Xiro, pers. comm. August 20, 2006). The fact that government officials apparently did not share their priorities, in spite of the promises made in the Accords, led some to feel that there was "something not quite right" (Léopold Anñjo, pers. comm. July 28, 2006), a sentiment that further discouraged them from attributing ideological legitimacy to the government in power.

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

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

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

While elected officials from pro-independence parties were supposed to represent the interests of the Kanak, many community members had been disappointed by them as well. One village resident expressed dismay that, as he saw it, Kanak leaders had "turned their backs on us" (Léopold Anñjo, pers. comm. July 28, 2006). He declared that these politicians, too, were "corrupt", thinking only of money, and couldn't be counted on. Others noted that the only time they saw their representatives was at the approach of elections, when candidates visited villages in an attempt to garner votes, and that they never attempted to consult the communities before taking decisions. As one local resident insisted, "we no longer trust anyone in political parties" (Nicolas Trukû, pers. comm. August 2, 2006).

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

Rhéébù Nùù members explained that they had altogether abandoned allegiances to political parties – pro-independence or loyalist – and turned instead to the protest group. As one activist explained, "If the politicians don't follow us, that's not our problem.

[...] If at the next vote the politicians will see that they've lost a lot of votes, well that's their problem" (Pierre Ôê, pers. comm. August 7, 2006). In contrast, protest group members insisted that it was not a political party and that its actions were being performed in the interest of the people as a whole, not for partisan purposes. Some identified the beneficiaries of Rhéébù Nùù's actions as "our children", others as "the Kanak people" or even "all New Caledonia" plus the tourists who would visit it. Thus, in contrast to their views of politicians as acting only in the interest of their party or even for individual monetary gain, Rhéébù Nùù sympathizers believed that the protest group was acting for the welfare of the wider society.

This trust in Rhéébù Nùù was, in part, due to a respect for and trust in – in other terms, ascription of personal legitimacy to – one of the group's leaders, Gabriel Kwùù. As one Rhéébù Nùù member explained, unlike politicians, Gabriel "doesn't work for himself – he works for the group" (Karine Wù-waayé, pers. comm. July 31, 2006). This trust contains an irony in that Gabriel had long been a politician, including a stint as the secretary general of the local town of Yaté from 1984 to 1989 and then the mayor from 1990 to 1995, followed by a place in the national government in 2001 where he was responsible for the Customary Affairs dossier. Gabriel was different from other politicians, though, in the eyes of his followers. Rather than being a liability, in fact, his previous involvement in politics was seen by some as an asset, due to the fact that when beginning to lead Rhéébù Nùù, Gabriel was "already politically mature" (Frédéric Ciwurii, pers. comm. August 14, 2006). Some local residents had followed Gabriel's leadership throughout his political career, which had been unusually peripatetic. He had joined the militant pro-independence party Palika early on and then left it in 1997 to found the Fédération des comités de coordination indépendantistes (FCCI), created as part of a coalition with the loyalist RPCR party and thus viewed by many Kanak as a betrayal. In 2002, the FCCI evicted Gabriel from the party when he criticized the RPCR for granting Inco exploration rights, nearly for free, to a peninsula near the Goro site; Gabriel felt that they had sold off the country's resources too cheaply, and also worried that the refinery project in the south threatened the Koniambo Project (see above). One Rhéébù Nùù member explained this wandering itinerary as stemming from good will and a sort of naïveté regarding the corruption of New Caledonian politicians: Gabriel was "for sustainable development, believing that the right-wing people will do what's necessary for things to go well. But when Gabriel understood too late that they try to turn people, that they're corrupt, it's not easy. So he left" (Léopold Anñjo, pers. comm. July 18, 2006). Others explained that they had followed him throughout because of his personal qualities: his intelligence, education (he had studied civil engineering in Paris) and – above all – trustworthiness; he had "always had absolutely clear ideas, without ideas behind [ulterior motives]" (Nicolas Trukû, pers. comm. August 2, 2006). Another Rhéébù Nùù leader explained his loyalty to Gabriel by the fact that he owed his political savvy to his colleague:

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

Their perception of Gabriel as intelligent and educated led some to a conclusion that his role was to keep abreast of the issues at hand, through discussions with scientists and lawyers, while the role of Rhéébù Nùù's members was to participate as "simple activists" (Thomas Kâbwi, pers. comm. 8 August 2006). However, village residents also particularly appreciated the information sessions

that Gabriel regularly held after church services. Even a villager who felt that he could not participate directly in Rhéébù Nùù's actions because of a family dispute with Gabriel nonetheless felt that "luckily there are people like Gab" to fight for Kanak people's interests (Armand Drovîa, pers. comm. August 5, 2006).

Crisis of structural legitimacy

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

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

While his suggestion appeared to involve modifying, while continuing to work within, the existing political system, another speaker proposed a more radical solution, greeted by enthusiastic applause. She had entirely lost faith in democratic structures, which seemed inevitably to lead to greedy struggles over power. Instead, she felt that customary authorities were better able to represent their subjects and advocated empowering them to fight on behalf of the Kanak people.

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

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

As I have found elsewhere in New Caledonia (Horowitz, 2008), there was a tendency for people to judge the legitimacy of a project by whether it had been initiated, and was supported, by customary authorities. The government's crisis of structural legitimacy may

have reflected long-standing tensions between Kanak citizens and an authority that remains ultimately under the aegis of the colonial power. Formal recognition of a unique Kanak cultural identity has always formed an important part of pro-independence leaders' demands (Freyss, 1995; Henningham, 1992; Tjibaou, 1996), and respect for customary authority structures, despite significant alterations to these by the colonial government as described above, comprises a crucial element of this Kanak identity. Some scholars label such assertions of pan-ethnic identities, which pass over cultural differences among language groups and customary regions, as "reinventions" of tradition (e.g. Keesing & Tonkinson, 1982; Sahlins, 2001). However, such efforts often represent a form of political resistance (Bebbington, 1996) and a means of uniting members of diverse groups against an oppressive power (e.g. Glowczewski, 1998), as well as an attempt to restore a long-suppressed dignity (Hall, 1990). By insisting on the reassertion of customary authority, therefore, villagers were simultaneously reasserting their cultural identity, with all of the political implications this entailed.

Both the mining company, and the protest group that opposed it, attempted to turn people's support for customary authority to their own advantage. While maintaining positive relations with the formal government, the mining company tried to win the favor of customary leaders, perhaps expecting that these authorities would be in a position to persuade the villagers to support the mining project. In the early 1990s, before beginning work on the pilot refinery, Inco representatives performed a customary ceremony with local chiefs and customary landowners in an official show of respect. Over the years, they built an especially close relationship with Bernard Daa, the chief of Goro, the village closest to the mine site, through frequent visits and conversations. In 2004, in a less-publicized move, they invited a select group of customary authorities to Canada to visit a refinery similar to the one they were building in New Caledonia. Dominique Yivéé, a prominent village elder and customary landowner who had participated in this voyage, approved of such efforts, noting that "Inco did things well at first" (pers. comm. June 20, 2006), although he deeply regretted the fact that the customary authorities had given their approval of the project without demanding the provision of royalties in return, which the mining company was now refusing to provide, as this was an "Anglo-Saxon" notion. Nonetheless, he placed ultimate blame with the French government, since if the formal administration were to recognize the customary landowners, the company would be obliged to do so as well (pers. comm. July 10, 2006). When both Daa and Georges Nyêrê, the chief of Unia, the most populated local village, both died in 2004, the mining company provided a commemorative plaque for Daa's tomb but was left without a close ally among the local residents. Bernard's son would normally have replaced him as chief, pending confirmation by the village Council of Elders, but he was fully supportive of the mining project and unpopular with Rhéébù Nùù. At Goro, members and sympathizers of the protest group, most likely without the approval of group leaders, began to target Bernard's son and his family, as well as Bernard's widow, through violent threats and actions such as sabotaging household electricity supplies. In this tense climate, no new chief was appointed and the company remained without an interlocutor who could claim to represent the entire village. Meanwhile, Inco had not taken village-level micropolitics, and its ramifications, into account. Dominique Yivéé expressed resentment of the fact that company officials had privileged their relations with Daa and suspected that they had planned to provide the late chief, exclusively, with royalties in exchange for the right to build their refinery on lands that the Daa clan claimed but that Dominique insisted belonged to a group of clans that included the Yivéé (pers. comm. July 10, 2006).

Rhéébù Nùù was more successful than its adversary in building upon local people's turn to customary authority. The group's leaders had also evidently taken note of the prevailing crisis of personal, ideological and structural legitimacy affecting people's sentiments of mistrust in the government, and had built upon this in reinforcing their own legitimacy through deliberate association with customary authority structures. Although, like Inco, they had close ties to individuals such as Bernard Daa, they forged a broader base of legitimacy by involving as large a number of customary authorities as possible, not only in negotiations but in the very foundation of the group. At the group's inception, they had taken the strategy of inviting customary authorities from the entire archipelago to participate in ceremonies, if not in actual decision-making processes. On July 12, 2002, the newly-formed protest group erected a *bois tabou* – a large pole, carved with human faces and animals in a traditional style – on a nearby mountain where ancestral spirits were known to reside. Long strips of printed cloth were then tied around the pole. This was a version, writ large, of a practice found throughout New Caledonia (Naepels, 1998: 12–13; Sonia Grochain, pers. comm. February 26, 2008; Adrian Muckle, pers. comm. March 2, 2008) in which people erect a wooden pole topped with a knot of straw containing magical plants. This pole, known colloquially as a "taboo", forbids access to specific areas of land due to a transgression, thereby signaling a conflict over resources. In setting up such a pole, Rhéébù Nùù publicly indicated to the mining company and local residents that there was a conflict over the possession and use of resources in that region that needed to be resolved (Dominique Yivéé, pers. comm. July 10, 2006). In organizing this event, Gabriel Kwùù invited all the high chiefs of the Djubea Kapone customary region to participate. He followed customary protocols, whereby a message is passed, along with a "gesture" (a gift normally consisting of cloth, tobacco and cash), according to a prescribed chain of recipients that reflects one's alliances. Nearly all high chiefs of the region were present at the event (Mapou, 2003). Every year, on the anniversary of this day, Rhéébù Nùù members assemble to climb the mountain (by motorized vehicle and/or by foot) where prominent members give speeches and all commemorate the fact that their struggle is not yet over.

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

Rhéébù Nùù as lacking structural, personal and ideological legitimacy

In summary, then, both the company and the protest group used customary gestures and relied on the support of customary authorities in order to affirm their legitimacy, although Rhéébù Nùù did so far more successfully. This strategy encouraged many local residents to support Rhéébù Nùù, but not all. Not everyone agreed that Rhéébù Nùù had the backing of the chieftainships and customary landowners. Some actually charged Rhéébù Nùù leaders with displaying a lack of respect for custom and customary authority. One villager accused Gabriel Kwùù of hypocrisy, observing that Gabriel and his family resided in Nouméa, where his younger children were in school and where his son's wedding had

recently taken place, “and then he comes to tell us things about custom” (Baptiste Nyuxara, pers. comm. August 9, 2006). Baptiste saw Gabriel’s interest in an alliance with customary authority as stemming from a failed political career in which he had been kicked out of the FCCI and had “lost importance”. Gabriel Kwùù’s ancestors were from another region and therefore he had no basis for claims to customary landownership in the region around the Goro site; in fact, his clan was “at the end of the chain” in the hierarchy at Unia. Nonetheless, because “Inco said, ‘We want to talk with the customary landowners,’” Gabriel Kwùù had allied himself with these first-occupant clans, thus displaying the same type of hunger for power as any other politician. Meanwhile, the head of a clan with claims to customary ownership of part of the area of interest to the mining company insisted that Rhéébù Nùù had not been able to “bring the customary authorities along with them” because, in reality, they had not respected customary protocols, and he resented the fact that “they say they speak in the name of the customary authorities but the customary authorities haven’t handed over to them” (Dominique Yivéé, pers. comm. July 10, 2006). The installation of the *bois tabou* had been Rhéébù Nùù’s idea, and they had erected it before the arrival of the customary authorities at the mountain whereas the group should have waited to receive the elders’ authorization. According to Dominique, that moment had marked the beginning of a disagreement between Rhéébù Nùù and the customary authorities. Another villager felt that this tension had deep roots, stemming from a time long before Rhéébù Nùù even existed. This person recalled that during the violent pro-independence Events of the 1980s, activists led by Gabriel Kwùù had targeted the village chief for being too friendly with local gendarmes (Vincent Ékêrêkaré, pers. comm. August 5, 2006). They had burned down the chief’s house, killed his pigs, and threatened and insulted his family. A young boy at the time, Vincent had been profoundly marked by this experience and found it difficult to forgive Gabriel even though Rhéébù Nùù did “good things”. He recalled that “Gabriel Kwùù has allied himself with the chieftainships today but at that time he had no respect” (pers. comm. August 5, 2006). Thus, in Vincent’s eyes, not only did Gabriel lack personal legitimacy because of his past actions; Rhéébù Nùù lacked structural legitimacy because its alliance with the customary authorities was clearly strategic rather than sincere.

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

The villagers quoted above all had strong expectations of benefits from Goro Nickel. Although one of his brothers was a member of Rhéébù Nùù, Vincent Ékêrêkaré and several of his

siblings were employed by the project, and their late father had been a strong advocate of economic development. Baptiste Nyuxara highly valued his employment with the mining company and hoped that his children would also find jobs there. Despite becoming frustrated with the company’s reluctance to recognize the site’s customary landowners by providing them with royalties, Dominique Yivéé still held out hope that this would occur. Their expectations may have colored these villagers’ views of Rhéébù Nùù’s lack of legitimacy.

Other local residents, however, doubted the mining project’s benefits and strongly agreed with the protest group’s objectives, particularly regarding environmental protection; nonetheless, they chose not to support Rhéébù Nùù because they felt that the group used inappropriate means to achieve these ends. Several pointed out the irony of the fact that the burning trucks and tires had created air pollution, and that protestors had felled trees to build barricades. Moreover, these community members insisted that they were “against violence” (Ruth Pwita, pers. comm. July 10, 2006) and accused Rhéébù Nùù – or at least the “youth” who took violent actions in its name, sometimes as an excuse for settling unrelated personal disputes – of “savagery” or being “nasty”, and certainly not “staying calm” (Albane Juru, pers. comm. August 9, 2006). They were particularly shocked by intra-community violence; one woman who had been the target of such aggression wondered, “Are we against Inco, or are we against the others [in the village]?” (Ruth Pwita, pers. comm. July 10, 2006). However, they also disagreed with the use of forceful tactics against Goro Nickel. Some did not feel that violence was wrong under all conditions but believed that such strong protest was useless in the face of a powerful multinational. Others preferred to trust the company for as long as possible, while holding the threat of violence in reserve: “If Inco doesn’t make the effort to manage pollution, there’s a chance of an eruption one day” (Jean Yivéé, pers. comm. August 13, 2006). Some of these people explained their hesitation to resort to violence by noting the comparison, prominent in many minds, between the “Events” of April 2006 and the bloody Events of the 1980s in which over 60 people had died, mostly Kanak.

We are no longer in ‘84 [the year the most violent phase of the Events began]. I heard that they said that we have to do like in ‘84. That was war; the state sent in the army. [...] We were victims in ‘84; if we have to go to war again, I don’t agree. (Vincent Ékêrêkaré, pers. comm. August 5, 2006).

Another community member had been a participant in the violent, pro-independence actions of this period and had, in fact, been under the leadership of Gabriel Kwùù. He observed that many of the active members of the protest group had also followed Gabriel in the 1980s. “He taught us many things; lots of people discovered: ‘That’s how it is, there’s breakage’; no, I’ve calmed down” (Baptiste Nyuxara, pers. comm. August 9, 2006). For all these villagers, then, Rhéébù Nùù’s use of violent tactics meant that the group did not possess ideological legitimacy.

Conclusions

This paper has applied a micropolitical ecology approach to an examination of local people’s responses to an indigenous protest group targeting a multinational mining project in New Caledonia. First, it has questioned direct, unidimensional correlations between resource scarcity or abundance and violent conflict, as drawn by the “environmental security” or “resource curse” schools, arguing that such connections may be mediated by socio-political factors. This study demonstrates that the environmental violence that occurred as Rhéébù Nùù set up barricades of burning tires and used a pick-up truck to charge gendarmes who fired back at them masked another, deeper tension rooted in local politico-economic history: a crisis of

political legitimacy. People had lost faith not only in the present government but in democratic structures themselves, which seemed to lead inevitably to partisan struggles and disappointing performance from corrupt officials; citizens turned instead to a protest group that they viewed as possessing more structural, personal and ideological legitimacy than did the government. Thus, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that eschews simplistic, deterministic theories about the causes of environmental violence, in favor of richer, more nuanced analyses of diverse, site-specific factors that inform instances of resource-related conflict.

If, as this paper argues, political legitimacy played a crucial role in conditioning violent responses to an exogenous threat to local livelihoods, the question then arises – as expressed in the introduction – as to how such legitimacy is constituted. It was beyond the scope of this paper to examine the protest group's establishment of its "external legitimacy" (O'Lear, 2007) in the eyes of the international community (which occurred through extensive networking and a discourse of indigenous rights); nor has it evaluated the mining company's establishment of its external legitimacy vis-à-vis its shareholders (which was challenged when some mocked them for hesitating momentarily in the face of violent resistance) and vis-à-vis ethical investors (which was shaken when it was deleted from the FTSE4Good index in March 2006 for failing to meet the human rights criteria). Instead, the present paper has investigated attempts to construct "internal" political legitimacy at a national scale. I found that this legitimacy was based in three elements, all of which needed to be present in order for a body – in this case, the government or the protest group – to be perceived as legitimate: representation of the people's interests, affirmation of cultural identity, and implementation of acceptable methods.⁴

First, the group had to be seen to represent people's interests. As discussed above, for most of the villagers in the Goro area, the government lacked this fundamental quality. Rhéebù Nùù, on the other hand, was seen by many villagers – even those who did not support it – as caring about their concerns regarding the environmental impacts and economic aspects of the mining project. Meanwhile, both mining company and protest group attempted to create an aura of legitimacy by allying themselves with customary authorities, thereby tapping into the second necessary element: affirmation of cultural identity. In the context of a long-standing independence movement, showing allegiance to a group that based its legitimacy in an association with customary authority constituted a reassertion of Kanak identity. Thus, both historical memory and cultural beliefs can inform people's decisions about whether to place their trust in the government, or in a group that allies itself with an alternative form of governance. Although Rhéebù Nùù was much more successful at convincing people of its base in customary authority than was the mining company, some community members doubted the sincerity and depth of such a strategic maneuver on the part of the protest group. Rhéebù Nùù alienated still other community members through their use of violence, thus failing to harness the third necessary element of legitimacy: acceptable methods. Violent means weakened the legitimacy of the protest group, in the eyes of those whose support they sought. Meanwhile, contra Weberian notions of the use of force by the state as by definition legitimate (see Riches, 1986), I argue that a resort to violence in fact undercut the legitimacy of the government in the judgment of its citizens.

As this article has shown, micropolitical ecology, through an examination of specific histories and cultural forms, can uncover and elucidate the multiple, complex reasons behind a particular instance of resource-related violent actions. To avoid and address conflict, resource managers and policy makers need not only to provide adequate protection from the risks of extractive activities, but also to encourage citizens to turn to the government for such protection, and they need to convince any protest groups of their good faith and

willingness to negotiate. In order to build such trust, governments must be acutely aware of their degree of political legitimacy – personal, structural, and ideological. Governing bodies need to understand whether their constituency is confident that individual representatives will pursue the people's interests, whether they believe in the validity of the form of governance in place, and whether they have faith in the moral integrity of the foundations of that system of government. In order to achieve such a careful comprehension of the way they are viewed, authorities need to be sensitive to the concerns of the various sub-cultures within the larger society, since these groups will each have differential experiences of local histories and distinct, culturally-based concepts of what constitutes legitimate authority. Meanwhile, in order to build public approval, the protest groups themselves need to be aware of their own legitimacy in the eyes of those whose interests they claim to represent. They must recognize the aspects of their approach that encourage stakeholders in, or discourage them from, placing their trust in the protest groups rather than in formal governing bodies or in the entities that the groups are targeting. Protest groups need to be aware of the degree to which they, and their leaders, are seen as possessing the efficacy and moral integrity that they claim their opponents lack. If they alienate segments of the populace through what is perceived as culturally or ethically inappropriate behavior, such as excessive greed for power or unnecessarily violent tactics, they may suffer a loss of legitimacy, and of popular support.

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Endnotes

¹ The refinery's development is, at this writing, suspended as of April 1, 2009 when thousands (if not tens of thousands) of liters of sulfuric acid spilled from the refinery into a local creek (Cochin & Ribot, 2009).

² Local residents had been influenced by a very vocal member of a Nouméa-based NGO who was convinced that the "heavy metals" to be released into the marine environment would cause horrific birth defects. Scientists who had been selected by Rhéebù Nùù and the local government to investigate the environmental impacts of the pipeline and effluent stated that, unlike mercury, the elements to be released did not pose a risk of birth defects (despite other potential hazards for the ecosystem).

³ This document was finalized in May 2009 (Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes, 2009).

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the psycho-social origins of people's beliefs that these elements are in place, which may in fact rest on their adoption of "cultural norms" that serve the hegemonic interests of the elite.

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