

Points de relâche, points d'appui

Points of release, points of refuge



I AM the silent observer. I am the forgotten one.

Though in watching and writing this, I may not be forgotten after all. Or at least, my story may survive, if not my name.

I bring tea and refreshments to the widow *Caldoche*, my employer and (unknowing) supplicant Madame Marguerite X Fournier. She is entertaining Kanak High Chief Ataï of the Petit Couli people on her front porch.

The tea is the pale Paris blend. The cups are the finest porcelain, imported most carefully from the other side of the world. The refreshments consist of a fruits salad of precisely seven ingredients, including pebbles.

This on the arcane instructions of Chief Ataï – which he had previously communicated to me in our language. This was fortunate, as the people of *Grande Terre* – as the *Colonialité* new name would have our long, lean, dragon-backed mountain island – express in 30 mutually unintelligible languages.

Madame Fournier says nothing to this. She merely arches one expressive eyebrow, and pauses, and follows with the other. Which by now I know means she is holding a personal reverie on *Points de relâche* – points of release; and *Points d'appui* - points of refuge, points of support.

We know each other possibly too well by now, is what I am thinking.

And I add (though silently, as is my purpose): *People became these points themselves.*

For this Pacific of ours is full of entangled histories. As in the stick maps of oceanic navigators, even the space is filled with portent.

All this, in *l'an de grâce* 1878 in *Nouvelle Calédonie*, a recent French ‘possession’. Well, almost.

Ataï says, “Madame, I am intoxicated with your strange manners, at once so gracious yet fantastic. All this with the air of a city built on empty promises.”

“Sir, would you have me reconfigure our collective possession of *Grande Terre*, into a private passion? For you, for only you?” she replies.

Ataï nods silently, for he has learned this is the Europeans' strongest sense of assent. This is what she wants, he supposes.

“Or *ours*?” says madame, a deployment of affect and intimacy.

“Perhaps the intimacy can mitigate the effect,” says Ataï. “Even if your love comes to me as part of your authority.”

“But total love supposes possession, as courage supposes danger. One who loves is to a lover as a soldier in times of peace is to a soldier in times of war.” Her riposte.

“Well then,” says Ataï, “Let me be your emissary.”

“Ours could be a geopoetic adventure, if nothing else,” Madame replies.

“Something else is fine by me,” says the Kanak warrior, shifting his penis gourd uncomfortable under his trousers. For it is a doubly tight fit.

“The French Pacific is la belle void,” Madame sighs.

“Fixes in the maps of Oceania are where narrative and event are joined, locating themselves within shifting tides and the caressing warm winds. The cause of freedom and its core is just the same, no matter where you're from,” says Madame Fournier sipping on her tea.

“Love and savagery are the twin columns supporting the overarching lintel of our empire. They both cast shadows,” she concludes.

Ataï: “Let us set aside all other histories and plunge into the new history of our hearts. Will you marry me?”

Madame shakes her head slowly.

Regretfully.

But with a small smile too.

“Ah, *non*,” says Mme after some time. “We are as but a landed gentry clinging to an unstable frontier. Our very foundations are as febrile and fragile as a gecko’s tread.”

“As an Empire of Love, we must by rights dance along a continual edge of collapse. This is the eternal nature of love, and especially doomed love.”

Ataï repeats: “If your colonial dream is to make dream families, well then I offer my seed.”

“*Oui*, dear chief but my goals are different,” says Madame. She does not elucidate further.

Then she adds: “For though my people are masters, we will not be tyrants.”

“You already are,” rejoins Ataï. “I would rather we explore the possibilities of *métissage*.”

Ataï sits, his long lean thighs protruding his chair as stalks of defiance. A palisade. He rubs his hands along those denimed thighs. “Our state of communication is thousands of years old,” he says. “I am not the first leader – not by a long shot – to have his land stolen and replaced with rocks.

He pauses. A long while. I count to seventeen in this silent hiatus.

A kagu bird calls; joined in a duet by its mate. In my mind’s eye I can see the partner crouching, wings outstretched, crest erect, a prelude to mating.

The duet carries notes of pathos and pride. The symbolism of the birds’ physiognomy – their wings not reduced like other flightless birds, but merely lacking musculature for flight – is part of our moment here. This pause in the headlong stubbing of toes into the tragic events of the insurrection, and all their there-afters.

The birds’ distinctive song reminds Ataï he’s here. Their calls, which normally go on for 15 minutes, are inexplicably cut short. A silence in the hills.

Ataï says: “We are condemned to the impotence of understanding. Not of empathy. An impotence as fulsome as our isolation is complete. We are lost.”

She mimics him, “Let us set aside the history of events to plunge into the history of hearts.”

Madame stands elegantly. She inclines her head. Her many layered skirts, all impossibly white, rustle.

They retreat into the coolness of the house. Just this once. They return to the porch exactly 57 minutes later. Her hat is askew. That is all.

Ataï sits back down, now in Madame's seat.

And continues his thoughts, as if they'd never been broken: "Ours is but a small stream, a dark stream, a trickle of history borne on the far greater tides of love in an empire, Of unrequited loves. Of impossible loves. Of vaunting and celebratory loves. We are small currents, borne on brief currents. That will swirl. And then be forgotten."

She murmurs. "Loves that could never last; as they could never even begin. Such is our complex and sad fate. Our fated destiny."

Ataï: "Your Horned Beasts trample the graves of our ancestors."

"*Au revoir* Madame. I would have loved you. I could have loved you. But your purpose was to reject me. Mine was to stumble into unrequited revolution instead."

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Much later Madame Fournier confides in me, *maîtresse à servante*.

"I could have curtailed a revolution. But I didn't.

"I was unharmed, my properties spared; as was my husband's grave. All because of me.

"Garnier told me many times: I should have surrendered myself and I would have prevented the insurrection. At the time, I did not disagree. He went on 'there is almost always a female reason determining great projects.' Again I did not disagree.

“And even so, with this knowledge in hand, I had demurred. (Except for that once)

“I could have prevented a bloody revolution. I could have stopped the revolt of 1878. With just a little more *fraternité*. But I didn’t.

“I failed in my purpose, for I never knew it was so. And for that I am sad.”

“I would be too,” I say.

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But this is still to come.

For now, Chief Ataï, he sighs. Gets up.

He tips the pebbles from the fruits salad bowl over the balustrade, into Madame Fournier’s flower garden beneath.

He descends her front steps.

He steps around the grave of Monsieur Fournier.

Stalks off, stiff-legged.

To his revolution.

The kagu resume their duet.

I tidy up.

This is true:

On 1 September 1878, Chief Ataï's resistance forces were surrounded by the French military. With them were Kanak warriors from the Canala tribe, ancient enemies of Ataï's Peti Couli people and who had sided with the French.

A Canala warrior named Segou fatally speared Ataï.

Ataï, his praise-singer Andai, and his young son were killed and decapitated. Ataï's hand was also cut off.

"Seeing Ataï fall at Segou's hands, the Kanaks unleashed their death cry in an echo to the mountains. The Kanaks love the brave." So wrote Louise Michel, the French Communard hero in exile in New Caledonia at the time.

A French ship's lieutenant named Servant received the two men's heads and Ataï's hand from Segou. He sold them for 200 francs to Dr Navarre, a naval doctor – who shipped them in tin boxes filled with phenol to Professor Paul Broca, founder and president of the Anthropological Society of Paris (SAP).

Chief Ataï's head was cast in bronze by Félix Flandinette, then stripped of its flesh and brain.

The heads were held in the SAP collection of skulls in the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. In 1951 SAP's skull collection was transferred to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, where they were displayed in a cabinet for decades.

They were returned to the Kanak people of New Caledonia in 2014.

The resistance of Ataï and the Kanak people to French colonialism continued, in La révolte kanak de 1917 led by Chief Noël of the Tiamou tribe (also decapitated with his head sent to France); a failed revolt in 1967; widespread civil unrest in the 1980s ("The Events") and the uprising in 2024.