

CHRISTIAN KAUFMANN

Obituary: Roger Boulay (1943–2024)

Abstract

Roger Boulay (1943–2024) devoted the majority of his professional life to building an inventory of Kanak material culture from New Caledonia. In 1979, Jean-Marie Tjibaou had passed the idea for this project on to Boulay, who immediately set to work in New Caledonia and in European museums. In 1982, he became a part-time curator at the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania in Paris, and began reorganizing that museum collection and its displays. In subsequent years he created or co-commissioned an amazing variety of exhibitions, in Paris, Nouméa, and elsewhere. He often looked at objects from unexpected angles, preferring the critical eye of the craftsman he had been. From 1993 to 1998, Boulay worked in Nouméa as a member of the team that was key to bringing the Centre Culturel Tjibaou to functioning. Roger Boulay passed away on July 2, 2024.

Keywords: Roger Boulay, Kanak architecture, Kanak art, New Caledonia, Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa



Figure 1. Roger Boulay at home, working on drawings of Kanak art works, 2022. Photograph courtesy of Mathieu Harel-Vivier

Before being attracted to anthropological subject matters, Roger Boulay had learned how to forge steel (see his first publication, from 1972, in the selected bibliography that follows). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he taught unemployed youth at a Marseilles institution engaged in social work, encouraging them to enlist for professional training. In addition, he observed sculptors and learned from them how to work one's way around and into a piece of wood. He was also a gifted draughtsman and therefore a keen observer. He later joined Animation Jeunesse in Paris—an association created by the French Catholic scout movement that sponsored nationwide projects like the one he worked at in Marseilles. In the long run, engaging with people as individuals in their social context combined very well with Boulay's mindset, which focused on knowledge about technical practices. He eventually became an expert on the arts of the South Pacific and also a rather unconventional and productive museum curator, as the list of his publications, especially those linked to exhibitions, shows.

Boulay obtained his first university degree in sociology at the Free Catholic Faculty in Angers before moving to Marseilles. A decade later, in the mid-1970s, he trained as a potential future curator in the history of art across periods and continents at the École du Louvre. It is by chance that the founder of Animation Jeunesse, George Dobbelaere, and one of his friends, Philippe Missotte, had assisted Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1975 with the organizing of the "Melanesia 2000" festival in Nouméa, New Caledonia. In 1979, Missotte helped Boulay establish contact with Tjibaou, who in turn asked Boulay to establish the first inventory of Kanak material culture in European museums—one in which objects were properly identified and photographed. The volume *Objets kanak*, produced in 1982 by the newly created Office Culturel, Scientifique et Technique Canaque, was the result of his work. It included objects from the comprehensive Fritz Sarasin collection in the Basel Ethnographical Museum (now Museum der Kulturen Basel). The volume was meant to be used by Kanak communities and schools.

In 1980, Boulay enrolled in the Study of Religions program at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, supervised by Professor Jean Guiart. In 1982, Guiart recruited Boulay as a part-time "chargé de collection" for the Oceania section at the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens in Paris. While spending part of his time in New Caledonia in the years to follow, Boulay carried out fieldwork for his doctoral thesis on Kanak sculpture and architecture. By a sad coincidence, Boulay was in Hienghène, a commune in the North Province of New Caledonia, on December 5, 1984, when Jean-Marie Tjibaou's brother Louis and nine other independence supporters were murdered. Boulay was performing a detailed study of the building

techniques of new chiefly round houses at the time, while Louis mounted the spire on a newly thatched roof earlier that day.

Likely recommended again by Guiart, Boulay was asked to teach at the École du Louvre. He inspired his students to look for the details of technical achievement within individual artworks and was, therefore, greatly appreciated. Moreover, he encouraged his students to find the function of the object within the local society at the time of collection, and to determine under what circumstances the object changed hands. Boulay also accompanied his students on visits to museums and their study of collections outside of France.

For the fourth Festival of Pacific Arts, planned to be held in Nouméa in 1984, Boulay assisted in turning one of J. M. Tjibaou's cherished ideas into reality: bringing together an exhibition called *Musée imaginaire des arts de l'Océanie* by soliciting loans from museums in Europe and beyond. Following growing social unrest around the movement for Kanak independence, both events were eventually cancelled. Boulay was nevertheless able to oversee the installation of this very exhibition in 1985 at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (MNAAO) in Paris.

After this major event, Boulay began to reorganize the permanent display of the galleries devoted to Oceania at the MNAAO, while Denis Guillemard adjusted the museum's storage setup and professionalized the care for the objects. Thus, the arts of Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Aboriginal Australia came into focus. Boulay initiated a number of new acquisitions. In 1986 he defended his thesis, entitled "La grande case kanak: les rapports entre architecture et sculpture en Nouvelle-Calédonie," at the Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. The Direction des Musées de France (DMF), the organization coordinating museums in France, put in place a long-term project aimed at establishing inventories of collections from Oceania in provincial museums. Boulay served as its coordinator until 1993, encouraging a large group of former and current students as well as local curators to consider the individual objects and their history as key elements for contextualizing collections. Indeed, Boulay and a few assistants put together a detailed list of people from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century—such as navy personnel, doctors, administrators, and scientists—who had travelled to the Pacific for all sorts of reasons and had potentially been collectors.

Political turbulence and the death of Jean-Marie Tjibaou rendered Boulay's quiet and solid work even more meaningful. Together with Emmanuel Kasarhérou, director of the Musée Territorial in Nouméa, Roger brought the exhibition *De jade et de nacre. Patrimoine artistique kanak* to life in 1990, first in Nouméa and then in Paris.

In 1989, exciting news about new Aboriginal Australian painters and their dedicated work reached Paris. In 1991, Boulay asked the Réunion des Musées Nationaux to provide funds to acquire paintings from Central Australia. Accompanying the anthropologist Françoise Dussart, he visited the community of Yuendumu. With these acquisitions a second Aboriginal art collection was created at the MNAAO, complementing the one brought back from Arnhem Land by Karel Kupka in 1963. Boulay and Dussart mounted a well-received exhibition at the Musée de la Porte Dorée (where the MNAAO was housed) in 1993.

From 1993 onward, Boulay was based in New Caledonia, being contracted via the DMF by the Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak, founded and directed by Octave Togna. In preparing the ground for the future Centre Culturel Tjibaou, exhibitions had to be organized and potential local Kanak audiences had to be found; there was a need to determine what they preferred to see and how they would experience what was presented. Two projects should be mentioned. In 1995, in preparation for the future Centre Culturel in Nouméa, Boulay and his team, including Marie-Claude Tjibaou, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, and others, reached out to Kanak individuals from all parts of New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands to solicit their cooperation. Boulay's team solicited comments on the historical portrait photographs of Kanak individuals taken in 1911 and 1912 by Fritz Sarasin and Jean Roux from Basel. For the exhibition, the portraits were printed slightly over life-size on fine cotton sails and presented alongside the collected comments projected via slides. The slides ran in a loop in the dark part of the exhibition, which created a very specific atmosphere. Thanks to Boulay's thoughtful exhibition layout and design, empathy and respect, and critique of the scientists' attitudes and actions in 1911, the meaningful way in which Kanak individuals deal with the power of these portraits all came together. The exhibition travelled the following year to Basel and then to Paris.

Of quite a different character was Boulay's involvement with the exhibition *Spirit blong bubu i kam bak*, which opened on June 27, 1996, at the then newly built Vanuatu Cultural Centre in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu. Boulay served as a particularly efficient member of the curatorial team, along with Ralph Regenvanu, presenting this very special selection of loans from European museums—see the catalogue *Vanuatu, Océanie: Arts des îles de cendre et de corail* or *Arts of Vanuatu*. Boulay added to this touring exhibition a highly relevant section with historical photographs. Later, accompanied by Kirk Huffman, he travelled with the exhibition to its next venue at the Musée Territorial of Nouméa.

During his years in Nouméa, Boulay was part of Emmanuel Kasarhérou's team for the upcoming Centre Culturel. He was involved in planning what to

present of Kanak culture and its links to societies in Oceania. He took joy in both physically and conceptually mounting a permanent exhibition with new elements commissioned specifically from artists like Edward and Matthew Salle, the *malagan* carvers based far away on Tataou Island in Papua New Guinea. Boulay avidly supported contemporary artists from the Pacific, such as Micheline Néporon, a Kanak person, who created a non-text-based system of signs and sign posts for the Centre Culturel; and Michael Mel, an artist from the Papua New Guinea Highlands, who advised on how to perform art for a new public audience.

After the inauguration of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou, Boulay returned to Paris. The DMF enlisted him to advise three museums outside of Paris holding important collections from Oceania on how to improve their inventories and redevelop their exhibitions. For the museums of Angoulême, La Rochelle, and Rochefort, this project also facilitated the transfer of their data to the online database Joconde.

In 2001, Boulay tried once more to answer Jean-Marie Tjibaou's initial question, which was, in Boulay's words, "What are museums telling [their public] about the Kanak?" The exhibition *Kannibals et vahinés*, on view in Nouméa in 2000 and in Paris in 2001, was Boulay's explicit answer—and it proved to be a rather provocative one. Dealing foremost with European clichés expressed in ideas, pictures, objects, drawings, and more, it intended to confront the European imagination of the exotic with some aspects of real Kanak life. The inherent irony was, at times, not easy to grasp.

Boulay's involvement with Kanak art and society was crowned in 2013 with the exhibition *Kanak. L'art est une parole* at two venues: the Museum of New Caledonia in Nouméa and the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. In the meantime, he also completed the inventory of the "Patrimoine kanak dispersé."

Roger Boulay was born on August 6, 1943, in Parigné-le-Pölin to parents living in Sillé-en-Guillaume in the area of the Sarthe, a tributary of the Loire. Upon retirement he and his wife Nadia preferred to settle again in his natal country. There, he developed with pen and brushes a new oeuvre celebrating the work of Kanak artists (Fig. 1). Samples from the *Carnets kanak (Kanak Notebooks)*, Boulay's watercolour sketches of Kanak objects documented earlier, were shown at the Musée Hèber, Rochefort, in 2020; at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in 2022; and at the Centre Culturel Tjibaou in October 2023. Roger Boulay passed away on July 2, 2024 and is buried at the cemetery of Torcé-en-Vallée.¹

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Notes

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