

# Radio Djiido turns ten

Although its mission is to be the Kanak people's voice, Radio Djiido broadcasts news and commentary in French. This use of the colonial language to further an indigenous cause might appear odd, but the reason is purely pragmatic — there are 32 different Kanak languages.

By KALINGA SENEVIRATNE

TEN YEARS since it first began broadcasting, *Radio Djiido*, the 'Voice of Kanak Independence', has seen more than its share of problems — lack of funding, jammed signals and Molotov cocktails aimed at driving it off the air. Today, Radio Djiido — a station run by the indigenous Kanak people of this South Pacific territory — remains the voice of the Kanak struggle for independence against the French.

On a regular day the radio, the highest-rating station in New Caledonia apart from the French Government-run RFO, broadcasts news and commentary that it hopes will educate the Kanak people in the run-up to a vote on self-determination in 1998. The station also promotes Kanak music, including a new form of contemporary music called 'Kaneka' born out of the independence struggle and which was popularised by Radio Djiido itself.

'When we started, the military tried to jam the signal. When we presented news, there was no radio,' says Nicole Waia, manager of Radio Djiido.

Although its mission is to be the Kanak people's voice, the station broadcasts news and commentary in French. This use of the colonial language to further an indigenous cause might appear odd, but the reason is purely pragmatic — there are 32 different Kanak languages.

Because of the diverse languages Waia, a Mare islander, says: 'I can talk to my people, but other Kanak people can't understand me. So we can't present our programs in Kanak languages, it's too difficult.'

Since colonisation in 1853, the French have used the media in New Caledonia to drum up support for colonial rule. The media has been tightly controlled by the French, with French media tycoon Robert Hersant owning

various publications and a radio station.

Radio Djido's creation in 1985 was the first attempt by the indigenous Kanak people to challenge French colonial propaganda, as they had no media voice of their own for a long time. Its early broadcasts were transmitted within the boundaries of Noumea by unskilled voluntary staff, driven by little else but political commitment to the independence cause.

The French expected Radio Djido to have a short life span. Especially during its first year, it was targeted by Right-wing groups opposed to independence. Even the French military joined in the campaign to end Radio Djido's broadcasts. At one point, critics used bomb attacks and Molotov cocktails to try to silence the radio.

Today Radio Djido has not only survived for more than a decade, but broadcasts nationally and has two small sister stations in Lifou in the Loyalty Islands and Hienghène in the Northern Province.

Since the signing of the 1988 Matignon Accord between the pro-independence Front de Liberation National Kanak Socialiste (FLNKS) and the pro-French Right-wing party Rassemblement pour Caledonie dans le Republique (RPCR), Radio Djido became part of the cultural arm of the Kanak independence struggle known as 'Editions Populaires'.

'After the signing of the Matignon Accord, it is now better for us. We can now broadcast all over the country,' says Waia.

Radio Djido gets funding from the local governments of the Northern Province and Loyalty Island, which are FLNKS controlled. It was also assisted by the Australian union movement's foreign aid agency, or Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA).

The pro-French RCPR has its own daily newspaper *Les Nouvelles Hebdo* and a private radio station called Radio Rythme Blue.

The FLNKS's plan since the Matignon Accord is to make economic development and education more equitable, preparing the Kanak people for a national vote for self-determination in 1998. That vote is a key part of the Matignon agreement.

'This is why it was important to have our own radio, to educate our people, and others too, on the political, economic and social reality,' Waia says.

But the divisions among the Kanak community ahead of the 1998 vote is also affecting Radio Djido's economic future. Recently, FLNKS changed its strategy from a purely political campaign to win a vote on independence next year, to an economic struggle to first gain control of New Caledonia's nickel and tourism resources.

In the wake of this change, FLNKS's attempts to work out a compromise with RPCR on the independence vote has split the Kanak community. Many

## KALINGA SENEVIRATNE

Radio Djiido listeners want their leaders to explain to them the FLNKS' change in strategy for independence. But Waia says the leadership has been reluctant to use the radio to do so, and is pressuring the station to tone down its criticism of some FLNKS policies.

'Sometimes we have a lot of problems with FLNKS leaders, because Radio Djiido is a community radio station and we have to respect the people,' says Waia.

'When I don't agree with what they decide now, I have to tell them, "Listen I don't agree, you have to explain to the people. It's not my role; it's your role because you are a political leader".'

This is why Waia wants Radio Djiido to be financially independent, though the station gets annual subsidies from the two FLNKS-controlled provincial administrations. The station is now aiming for a bigger slice of advertising revenue — not easy for a community-based news-oriented station.

'The grants from the provinces are not enough for all of us here,' says Waia. 'Our salaries are not high and have remained the same since we started. But it is not a problem for us because it's our choice to come here and work for our people.'

Located in a small house in a southern Noumea suburb, the station has basic but modern studio and editing facilities and a small transmitter powerful enough to cover most of the country. There are no satellite feeds or other expensive communication technology. Its permanent staff of six are all Kanak.

Waia believes radio can play a very important role in the political process towards independence — if the FLNKS leaders know how to use it.

'The problem in this country is that the Kanak leaders don't know how to use the media,' argues Waia. 'If they have confidence in the staff who work in the newsroom, I think the message they want to give could be understood by the militants and a lot of people.'

© Copyright 1997 InterPress Service. Republished with permission.

□ *Kalinga Seneviratne is an academic at Macquarie University, Sydney, and a South Pacific correspondent for InterPress news service.*