

## Excursus E : daily life on Futuna

From the time he landed on Futuna, 9 November 1837, Peter Chanel kept a diary. Nearly every day he entered a short notice of what he had done and of what had happened. Six weeks later probably on the day of Christmas, his notebook was stolen. He started a new one. By the end of 1839 the first notebook was full and he started a third one. After he was murdered these two diaries were found back, the last one with spots of his blood on the cover. Father François Roulleaux, who worked on Futuna later and wrote a first biography of Peter Chanel, had both in hand. Some years later, in a way that has never been explained, that last one, covering 1840 and 1841, has gone lost. Only the first one has come to us. It covers the time from 26 December 1837 to 31 December 1839.<sup>1</sup>

Here are some typical entries:

26 [December 1837] Tuesday

The feast that was announced for Aro is cancelled. Some of the people go to Poi where the king is, and where there is also a small feast. The feast at Aro will be tomorrow, but some say it will be in Assoa.

27 [December 1837] Wednesday

I am happy to be able to offer the Holy Sacrifice for the eleventh time. For the intention of the superior general of the Society of Mary. There is no feast in Aro, only in Poi, in the presence of the king. In the evening the king of Singave comes with some chiefs of his valley. He stays the night in Aro.

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31 [December 1839] Tuesday

530<sup>th</sup> Mass. Rising at 4 h.<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>. Holy Mass and other exercises. A few islanders come and disturb us during the morning.  
Language study etc.

With the letters from Futuna that have been found, the diary gives us a good idea of daily life on Futuna.

Chanel and Marie-Nizier got up very early, around four. Especially in the beginning, when they lived in Niuliki's house, they made sure they had finished morning prayer and meditation before the daily kava chewers came in to prepare the morning drink for the royal household. Once they had their own house, Chanel said Mass most days and they tried to have their prayers and Mass over by then. If by chance they had woken up late, prayers had to be postponed to a later hour. They kept the usual monthly retreats (e.g. 06.10.39) and on the appropriate days, e.g., the Assumption of Our Lady,

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<sup>1</sup> For the story of the diary cf. EC, pp. 9ff and 313ff. A critical edition of the diary insofar as it has survived can be found in C. Rozier, *Écrits de S. Pierre Chanel*, pp. 404 – 483. The dates in the text of this excursus refer to the dates in the diary..

they renewed their vows (15.08.39). Only rarely did Chanel preserve the Blessed Sacrament for an hour of adoration (08.09.39).<sup>2</sup>

As the diary shows, Chanel noted nearly every day which prayers had been said and when. He counted the Masses he said. Why the stubborn noting down, day after day, week after week, of prayers done and Masses said? As Lessard points out, regularity under the circumstances must have taken a great effort and noting it down helped them to be faithful.<sup>3</sup> The daily exercises themselves too must have helped them, as so many missionaries after them, to maintain a structure in their lives.

Privacy was an unknown luxury. Most Futunan houses have no walls, the missionaries did put up bamboo walls (18.08.38), but, in Polynesian fashion, it was normal for passers-by to look in and to enter at will, for a chat or just to light a pipe (15.01.38). There was always time for a palaver. Food and drink was shared. All of this could be so time consuming that at times even Chanel's patience wore thin (31.05.38). Sometimes he entertained his guests by playing the little organ (15.12.39). Once they nearly get into real trouble when they built a toilet behind their house in the bush (04.01.39). It caused a minor uproar. They quickly pulled it down and went back to using the beach.

Chanel and Marie-Nizier took part in the local kava-culture. They drank it from morning to evening and whenever invited into a house that they passed on their daily walks. A few times Chanel complained of nightly gripes if the kava had been exceptionally strong.

Chanel and Nizier were well adjusted to the local diet, in fact they got to like it. More often than not, people brought them enough food: roasted taro and yam, squid, shellfish, turtle, the choicest bits of pork and the nicest fish (08.10.38), etc. They also bought food, giving pieces of cloth in exchange, or the fishhooks Nizier made from nails and that were very popular (24.11.38; 03.01.39).

If they did not get enough cooked food, Marie-Nizier did the cooking. He also washed the clothes and baked the altar breads (not always a success! 22.03.38).

Apart from a few days of fever or diarrhoea, their health held out. Once, Chanel returned late in pouring rain to Poi and took a short-cut over the hill. He slipped a few times, as he put it, on his *derrière*, and had a sore back for weeks.<sup>4</sup>

Both were keen gardeners. Chanel asked Bataillon for a species of duck he calls 'Moscow ducks' and two different species of chickens that he heard were on Wallis. He wanted to establish them on Futuna and he asked Brother Joseph to catch a few and make boxes to send them to Futuna with the *Reine de Paix* which they expected to return any day. Chanel shared Bataillon's interest in trying out plants brought from Europe. He

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<sup>2</sup> G. Lessard gives a detailed enumeration of spiritual exercises as mentioned in the diary and in the letters. Cf. *Pierre Chanel, était-il mariste?* in Saint Pierre Chanel, Exposées présentés lors des journées d'étude, 16 – 18 juin, 2003, pp. 109 – 120.

<sup>3</sup> Lessard, G., loc. cit. p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Judging from the teeth in the relic, Chanel should have suffered a lot of toothache. There is no mention of it in the part of the diary that has come to us.

asked for seeds of melon, maize, chicory, carrots etc. Gardening on mountainous Futuna was not as easy as on a flat island like Wallis and Chanel was jealous of Bataillon's garden of 40 by 20 m. He kept goats and sometimes a pig. In September 1839 he wrote to Bataillon that he had a little goat family ready that Bataillon had asked for.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the enormous distances the different Polynesian island people knew of each other. Futuna had traditional ties with Samoa (or *Hamo*a as they call it) and Tonga. But stories of Fiji, Tahiti and even Hawaii reached Futuna also. Chanel had brought books along and regularly read in the *Voyage autour du Monde* by Dumont d'Urville. It told of Dumont's voyages in the Pacific and of the different islands he had visited. It must have helped Chanel to gain an understanding of the wider Pacific world (09.12.38; 17.01.39).

Both tried to learn English from Thomas Boag and the other Englishmen who off and on lived on Futuna (24.06.38 & 27.02.39). Marie-Nizier was soon fluent in Futunan. It took Chanel a long time but he worked at it nearly every day, writing down whatever he heard. He gradually built up a dictionary that has not been preserved. He understood the language fast enough because already in April 1838, after a night spent in a village he noted that he had been kept awake by dirty and obscene talk (22.04.38). Even after Bataillon had helped him, it took a few months before he started speaking in public. How well he must have understood Futunan is clear from a note saying that, having heard secret magic formulas, there were a few words he did not understand! To Bataillon, he wrote long sentences in Futunan and in October 1839 he admitted speaking the language tolerably correct.<sup>6</sup>

It is quite clear that both Peter Chanel and Marie-Nizier light-heartedly disregarded Colin's injunctions never to go out alone.<sup>7</sup> Chanel did so regularly, leaving Marie-Nizier at Poi. He enjoyed the dances, and stayed at any festivity he ran into. He treated sick women as well as men with the few medicines at his disposal. Wherever he was invited, he shared a meal with people. If it got late, or he was stopped by rain, he stayed the night. One Futunan granny showed him her grand-daughter telling him she did not want her to marry anybody but a French *ariki* (chief), but the only one present told granny to bring up her granddaughter to be a good girl (04.07.38). He did not mind receiving ladies at home even when he was alone (07.01.39).

Nizier often went out alone too, or with his good friend Thomas Boag. They visited people, joined in work projects, fishing parties or whatever. He used to shave the King and other bigwigs and became quite skilful in his father's trade, tailoring. He made little dresses for children and fitted a Futunan bride out with a gown (10.11.38).

When a ship neared the island a special yell resounded from village to village and the missionaries joined in the general excitement. With everybody else they rushed to where they thought the ship might make contact (10.09.38). The Futunans were not always in a strong position to bargain and they were not much good at it. Chanel used to

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<sup>5</sup> EC, doc. 51 [7].

<sup>6</sup> ...*d'une manière passablement correcte*, EC, resp. docs. 51 [13], 54 [2] & 55[1].

<sup>7</sup> Cf. above p. 33, 7°

get angry when he saw how unfairly they often were treated (16.05.38). Sometimes the sailors paid with worthless trinkets for girls to come on board. Chanel was amused when he saw one girl free herself, jump overboard and get away.

Sometimes the missionaries bought things from a ship for themselves: pepper, soap, flour, shoes (21.11.38) and salt for salting down pork, a technique the Futunans did not know and observed with keen curiosity (25.09.39 & 04.10.39). Chanel got a small canoe and bought tar from a ship to repair it (03.07.38). On one occasion they indulged by buying coffee.

Immediately after the fighting in August 1839, they were allowed to go everywhere and asked to treat the wounded (25.09.39). They had brought very little with them in the way of medicines, but became quite proficient in treating wounds and illness. They managed occasionally to buy medicines from a passing ship. Their services were highly appreciated (22.11.38).

Even in the excitement of war, they could go off and leave the house unattended. Nearly always they found their belongings intact on return (15.08.39). Very rarely something disappeared; once it was a precious bottle of medicinal liqueur (26.09.38), once a shirt (03.12.38).

People were not always kind. It once happened that young men behaved rudely. Chanel complained to the King who would not have it (16.08.38). Another time an old sick woman covered her face when Chanel came to visit her. She told him to get out, cursing him as he left (01.09.38).

Mostly Chanel's warm friendliness won their hearts. King Niuliki liked the two. He would come in to share their food, cook a meal, or bring something special. He took Chanel along on picnics to Arofi Island.

Chanel would sometimes tell them of how he dreamed of France, of the family he had left behind, and of his friend Claude Bret whom they buried at sea (15.12.39). His stories moved people to tears.<sup>8</sup> He remembered with pain that in the beginning children would run away when he entered a village, but later they cheered when they saw him coming and they would rush to tell their parents. In a letter to one of his friends in France he described proudly how the children would hold his hands and his cassock.<sup>9</sup> There can be no doubt. By the end of 1839, Chanel and Marie-Nizier had clearly built up a great deal of goodwill. People loved them.

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<sup>8</sup> EC, doc. 55 [1] & doc. 58 [4].

<sup>9</sup> EC, doc. 58 [1].