

Excursus F : The diary of Peter Chanel and the ‘Analyse’ of Joseph-François Roulleaux-Dubignon

No sooner had Peter Chanel and Marie-Nizier Delorme arrived on Futuna, in November 1837¹ than Chanel started a diary. The first attempt was aborted when his copybook disappeared. He started again and the first entry we have is of Tuesday 26 December 1837. He continued nearly daily entries right up to his death on 28 April 1841. When Chanel was killed, Futunans looted his house and took the diaries but they did not lose, destroy or even damage them. On his visit to Futuna, in June 1842, Bishop Pompallier was given the first volume intact. He took it to New Zealand and it may have been taken to France in 1850 with the remains of Peter Chanel. The second volume was given to Bishop Bataillon on his first visit as a bishop, in June 1844, and sent to Lyon in 1846.² Both volumes were kept in the archives of the Society of Mary. A copy was made of the first volume, but, unfortunately, not of the second one.

Peter Chanel’s friend Bourdin had the diaries in hand when writing the first biography in 1867: *Vie du P. Chanel*. After this publication the diaries were given to a former missionary, Joseph-François Roulleaux-Dubignon. Roulleaux had gone to New Zealand with the fifth group of missionaries in December 1840 and was sent together with Catherin Servant to Futuna after it became known in New Zealand (end November 1841) that Chanel had been killed. They reached Futuna in May 1842. After two years on Futuna he pioneered the first mission in Fiji and returned to France for health reasons in 1855. On request of his provincial, Fr. Morcel, Roulleaux made an analysis of the diaries.

In 1875 the two volumes were given to the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints as documents pertaining to the beatification process. The next year the cover of the second volume, showing blood stains of Chanel, was removed and given back to the Society. When, after the study of the documents, the diary itself was returned, the second volume, covering the years 1840 and 1841 up to the death of Peter Chanel, was missing. In spite of intensive searching it has never been found back.

The first volume of the diary has been published, together with the *Analyse* of Roulleaux for 1840 – 1841 and quotations from the second part in various documents, by Claude Rozier in his *Ecrits de S. Pierre Chanel*, Rome 1960. Rozier writes: ‘The damage resulting from the loss (of the second part) is to some extent limited by the fact that we have the analysis that Roulleaux has made of this volume’.³ At the same time Rozier warns that Roulleaux’ analysis is not free of bias.⁴ Because we dispose for the first two years of both the *Analyse* and the diary itself, we shall here try to appraise the bias so that we can use it for our further study of how things developed on Futuna.

For each of the two years 1838 and 1839 the diary in Rozier’s edition counts about 80 printed pages. It tells the many hundreds of insignificant details of daily life, e.g. on the weather, on people passing the missionaries’ house at Poi, on the food they are given or buy, etc. etc. Chanel was not trying to prove anything, he just jotted down what

¹ Cf. above, p. 65.

² Rozier, op. cit. EC, p. 313.

³ Idem, p. 314. Rozier refers to the *Analyse* as AR.

⁴ Idem, p. 483, n. 3,

happened and what he did from day to day. Chanel apparently wrote for himself. There is no indication that he intended to send it to Colin or anyone else. He is not proving anything. That is why it is of immense value for a study of Chanel as a missionary.⁵

The *Analyse* is in no way a summary. It skips weeks, even a whole month here and there. For the whole of 1838 Roulleaux has eight finely written 16° pages, for 1839 just five! For the historian it therefore is significant what Roulleaux considers important enough to mention, and what he leaves out. Here and there he puts a text in quotation marks, but even then it often is a shortened paraphrase instead of a quote, such as the picnic on Alofi Island (25 – 29.07.38).

1. Chanel's piety is important. For 08.07.39 Roulleaux recounts that Chanel preserves the Blessed Sacrament in order to hold an hour of adoration. He also relates that two girls take the happy initiative of decorating the picture of Our Lady in Chanel's house with flowers (18.07.38). He also relates that on 23.11.38 Niuliki turns up very early at the missionaries' house depriving Chanel of the opportunity to say Mass.
2. Food is very much on Roulleaux' mind. While the diary gives the general impression of plentiful supplies of taro, yam, fish and pork, the *Analyse* paints a picture of two missionaries constantly on the verge of starvation. On 25.09.38 he mentions that Chanel and Nizier went without breakfast, he leaves out that they compensated by having two meals later in the day!
3. From the diary it is clear that the two missionaries joined in the daily events of island life as a matter of course and enjoyed doing so. They often went with the king to feasts, funerals, etc and took part in the customary meals. Roulleaux says they did this in order to get some food (14.03.38). According to Roulleaux Chanel often sent Nizier to funerals just to share in the usual distribution of food. Chanel suffered a lot, he writes, of having to live on local food, of the irregularity of meals (ms. p. 8), of the kava being too strong and the living conditions extremely primitive. 'They often went hungry, Roulleaux writes, I know what that means. I went through it myself' (ms. p. 7). This remark confirms the impression that apart from wanting to depict Chanel as a martyr all through his stay on Futuna, Roulleaux also projects on Chanel memories of his own stay on the island. He had the reputation of not having been able to adjust to the local ways.⁶
4. When Chanel did not feel well and sometimes took a few days to get over an attack of fever or an upset stomach, it is given an unbalanced importance by leaving out that he was normally able to walk all over the island, enjoy the local food, work his garden, join in building work etc. With this selection Roulleaux further colours the image of Chanel as a poor, suffering man. That on one occasion Chanel had to vomit straight after communion, throwing up the Sacred Species, adds a dramatic touch that Roulleaux has not missed. Admittedly, Chanel was very upset by it himself! (05.10.38).

⁵ A specific study of the missionary work of Chanel has to my knowledge not been done yet.

⁶ Garin to Colin, 29.10.42: '*le p. Roulleaux a de la peine à se faire aux manières des naturels, (...) trop attaché à ses opinions, et trop susceptible (...) un peu porté à la mélancolie..*', LRO, doc. 209 [26]. Roulleaux did not get along with Catherin Servant, cf. LRO, doc. 332 [1].

5. Roulleaux evidently lacks empathy for island life. He does not understand, let alone appreciate, the meaning of the constant exchange of gifts that is the warp and woof of Polynesian society. Chanel and Nizier wholeheartedly joined in the game of the thing. Nizier did this, among other things, by sewing clothes and by using iron nails to make fishhooks that were very popular. For Roulleaux it is an indication of their abject poverty: ‘Nizier has to make fishhooks from old nails in order to buy some food’! (19.11.38) When a ship called and the captain came to see Chanel, the poor priest had nothing to offer the captain but a few coconuts (21.12.38). We can be sure the captain enjoyed the fresh coconuts immensely after the foul water on board ship!

6. Chanel was no romantic. After attending a dancing session in Singave, he noticed (14.03.38) that there was more immorality on the Singave side of the island than under the eastern part under Niuliki. He still calls it a *dance vraiment joyeuse*. Roulleaux cites the immorality bit but leaves out the joyous nature of the event. He then generalizes by saying that from the whole of the diary it is clear that dancing was a mania all over the island, adding as his own comment that it was all far from innocent (ms. p. 7). Whatever he sometimes may have thought of it, Chanel was often present at dances and in Poi he at times joined in by playing his little organ to accompany the drumming.

When three days later Chanel mentions a suicide, Roulleaux inserts a comment of his own on the frequency of suicides among women and young men (17.03.38). His work is indeed more of a commentary than of an analysis, a commentary moreover that leaves one with the impression that Roulleaux had never got over his culture shock.

7. In the diary the general picture of Niuliki is that of a wise chief of a population that is divided on the lotu. Himself, he is torn in two directions. There are things in the lotu he likes, there are other things he does not want at all. The tension between victors and vanquished, *malo* and *lava*, is always just under the surface. Futuna is constantly on the edge of war, but Niuliki wants peace. He knows it would be dangerous to force the issue by pushing the issue of the lotu one way or the other. He protects the missionaries and looks well after them. This is what Chanel writes to Colin and there is no reason to put it down as pious talk.⁷ As the paramount chief of a divided people Niuliki lets things mature; he takes no sides.

The *Analyse* builds up the scene for the martyrdom of Chanel, as Rozier too points out in footnotes. On 16 October 1939 Niuliki passes the missionaries’ house without calling, on his way back he does it again: unusual enough for Chanel to write it down and wonder if he possibly is annoyed with them because of their war against the local gods.⁸ Roulleaux writes: ‘The King begins to dislike them and is increasingly ill-disposed towards Father because of his war against their god. He goes to see them less often’. If in the diary the king takes away all apprehension the next day by receiving Nizier and Thomas warmly in his house, Roulleaux leaves it out!

On 19.12.39 Chanel uses an opportunity to talk about the faith to a gathering of people. Some people leave the house, King Niuliki is the first to leave. Roulleaux comments: ‘One can see how Niuliki’s heart begins to harden. He has decided already not to

⁷ Chanel to Colin, 16.05.39: ‘Il promet à sa Grandeur que nous serions bien dans sa terre. Il n’a rien négligé pour tenir sa promesse. Il a pour nous une tendresse vraiment paternelle’. EC, doc. 45 [1].

⁸ ‘qu’il ne fût fâché contre nous, à cause de la guerre que nous faisons aux divinités de l’île’.

embrace the faith'. Chanel does not interpret things this way. In fact three days later he talks about the lotu to the king who 'reacts positively'. Roulleaux leaves that out.⁹

For November 1839 Roulleaux mentions that Niuliki agreed readily (*volontiers*) to the baptism of his dying grandson (09.11.39). The contradiction to his other statements does not seem to worry Roulleaux.

The so-called *Analyse* is a monument to Joseph-François Roulleaux-Dubignon, writing from his memories, more than twenty-five years after his stay on Futuna. He writes ten years after his return – his health broken - from Fiji where he had worked from 1844 to 1855 in dreadful circumstances, with little or no success. It also is a document showing how in the mid-1800's the Society of Mary venerated Peter Chanel, always an important item in the discernment process for beatification and canonization.

As a source document for the historian's discernment of what happened on Futuna in 1840 / 1841, we can use it only with care.

⁹ Cf. AR, ms. p. 19. Chanel, 19.12.39: '*il ne m'a fait que de bonnes réponses*'.