
SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS

POLYNESIANS IN THE CROSS-FIRE: THE HAWAIIANS CAUGHT BETWEEN FRENCH CAPTAIN ABEL DU PETIT-THOUARS AND AMERICAN MISSIONARY HIRAM BINGHAM, HONOLULU, 1837

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This article discusses the problems brought to the Polynesian people in the Hawaiian Islands by the presence of the French and American missionaries. Until now, these problems have been seen primarily from one side, that of the American missionary Hiram Bingham. The aim of this article is to also present the French side, as seen here essentially through the hitherto untranslated journal of Captain Abel du Petit-Thouars, who arrived in Honolulu in July 1837. The pages of Du Petit-Thouars' journal pertaining to his sojourn in these islands are: *Tome premier; chapitre VIII, pp. 317-95*, and references to these are usually presented in citations.

In the 1820s two events occurred which were to throw the lives of the Hawaiian rulers into confusion.

On 4 April 1820 Protestant Missionary Hiram Bingham and his wife Sybil, accompanied by six colleagues and their wives, arrived in the Islands from Boston, Massachusetts. Then, seven years later, on 7 July 1827, two Catholic priests, Alexis Bachelot and Patrick Short with three colleagues, arrived there from Bordeaux in France.

During these years from 1820 to 1827 the American missionaries had been hard at work, and Queen Regent Ka'ahumanu (the future king, Kamehameha III was only 13 years old in 1827) had become their firm disciple. As a consequence, declared Bingham, she "refused to admit or receive the Papal teachers" (Bingham 1981: 331).¹ The French captain Plassiard who had brought them, however, refused to take them back. They thus remained, and celebrated their first Mass just a week later. By January 1828 they had established "a small chapel in which," observed American resident William Alexander, "a small congregation was soon gathered" (Alexander 1899: 201)² and then, "by the end of July 1829, they had baptised 65 adults and a number of children, and had a group of catechumens under their instruction" (Kuykendall 1968 [1]: 140). Success was thus rewarding the efforts of the persistent Catholics.

This success, however, did not please everyone, and Bingham would say that these “Roman emissaries” were there to interrupt and thwart his own “evangelical efforts”. On 8 August 1829 Ka‘ahumanu published a law forbidding her people from embracing the Catholic faith (on pain of being condemned to hard labour) and then, on 3 January 1830, she forbade the Catholic priests from teaching their religion. Hiram Bingham noted, however, that “the Romanists... were erecting or enlarging their buildings” and were still busy “inculcating the Romish faith”, and subsequently, on 2 April 1831, a decree of banishment was announced to the Catholic priests, requiring them to leave within three months. They eventually departed Honolulu on Christmas Day that year. Triumph for Bingham could not be more complete.

Then, on 5 June 1832, Ka‘ahumanu died. Bingham was with her at the very last moment. “She turned her languid and friendly eyes upon me for the last time,” he wrote, and said, ‘I am going now’.” She died just before dawn. “The nation,” declared Bingham, “felt the shock.” However, he added, “None, perhaps, felt it more deeply than the missionaries, whose firmest helper had left them in the midst of their struggle” (Bingham 1981: 405, 433-34). Her place was taken by Kinau, half-sister of the future King.

When Captain Auguste Vaillant arrived in the impressive 800-ton warship *La Bonite* in October 1836 the Hawaiians assumed that this visit, as Vaillant himself would put it, “concerned the expulsion of the two Catholic priests for whom... I had come to seek vengeance”. He had indeed been instructed, before leaving France, to impress the Hawaiian people “with a true idea of the power of France”, but no specific persons had been named.

Soon after arrival, he invited Kamehameha III (now 23 years of age) aboard *La Bonite*, and showed him the ship’s weapons. “In less than a quarter of an hour,” he assured his guest, “all this can be ready to storm a beach, and mow down everyone who may try to resist!” The King, the Frenchman observed, “was quite at a loss”. The cross-fire, in which he found himself, was rapidly becoming less metaphorical. Vaillant then became more conciliatory, reassuring Kamehameha that “France... knows how to forgive”, and when Kamehameha finally left for shore he did so “to a salute of twenty-one guns”.

Before departing Honolulu Vaillant recorded that “the King had promised to welcome with special consideration all French people who may come into his States” (Vaillant 1845-52: 256, 258-62). Vaillant left on 24 October and then, six months later on 17 April 1837, the two priests returned—only to be ordered again to leave. They again refused, but this time remained aboard the ship, the *Clémentine*, which had brought them.

THE VISIT OF CAPTAIN DU PETIT-THOUARS

Abel du Petit-Thouars arrived in Honolulu three months later (on 8 July) in the frigate *Vénus*, heavily-armed with 58 cannon and some 470 men. Like Vaillant, he had been instructed “to give a strong idea of the power of France”. Accordingly, accompanied by British consul Richard Charlton, he went to call upon “Queen Kinau, who was governing in the King’s absence”. Kinau would now find herself in the midst of conflicting allegiances, not the least of which was to her own people.

The Frenchman soon raised the question of Alexis Bachelot, and asked “that he should be immediately allowed to disembark and to reside here... until he found a suitable time to leave. The Queen refused”, said Du Petit-Thouars. Then he noticed “that the Methodist missionary Bingham, present at this visit, was making a sign to the Queen to say no”. Seeing that the American’s influence here was much stronger than his, Du Petit-Thouars decided to withdraw, declaring that he himself “would put Mr Bachelot ashore”.

Bingham clearly manifested his influence when he presented the text of Kamehameha’s order banishing the Catholic priests for the second time. The Old Testament language of this document and its faultless English could perhaps lead one to believe this was the American’s own composition, the writer proclaiming:

Ye strangers all from foreign lands. . . I make known my word to you all.... The *men of France*, whom Kaahumanu banished, are under the same unaltered order.... I have no desire that the service of the missionaries who follow the Pope should be performed in my kingdom, not at all.

According to Bingham, during the course of this meeting he and the British consul had become involved in an altercation, at the end of which the consul had threatened him by saying, “Mr Bingham, if you insult me again, I will horsewhip you.” Another person, added Bingham, “had threatened to hang [him] at the yard-arm”. What Queen Kinau thought of these self-styled “civilised” people, arguing so violently in front of her, is not known. The two priests, however, were later put ashore from the *Clémentine*, and taken “to the Maison française where they lived” (Bingham 1981: 505-6, 508, Du Petit-Thouars 1840-1843 [1]: 328-29).³

On 20 October the King finally returned from Maui, and the next day Du Petit-Thouars, accompanied by two of his officers and the British and United States consuls, went to see him. The King must have felt this was an important event for “he was surrounded by his [half] sister Queen *Kinau*, his wife the Princess *Kalama*, by *Kaukini*, governor of Hawaii, by *Opili* governor of Mawée” and several other highly-placed chiefs. “The King,” wrote the

Frenchman, “was sitting in front of the Queen [Kinau] who dictated to him what he should reply. She, for her part,” he observed, “received her instructions from the head of the missionaries, Mr Bingham, placed behind her.” The threats the American had received earlier had clearly not deterred him. French patience was to be tested once again. As Bingham had now been in the islands for 17 years he would have realised that, as soon as his rivals had left, he would be able to undo everything they had done. This whole negotiation process was thus for him quite inconsequential. Meanwhile the Hawaiians, serving here only as Bingham’s mouthpiece, became increasingly confused.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the accounts of Du Petit-Thouars and Bingham of this meeting differ considerably. The Frenchman wrote:

We addressed the King in English but he... seemed not to understand.... So we sent for MM. Bachelot and Short, who speak *kanak* very well, to act as interpreters for us. The King, on the advice of Mr Bingham, pretended still not to understand what they said.” (Du Petit-Thouars 1840-43 [1]: 336-37)

Bingham, speaking of himself in the third person, said that “the King chose Mr Bingham for interpreter” but the British consul had “refused him, and sent for Mr Bachelot.... This obtruded priest,” said the American, “labored through a sentence... after which the King... followed him with the forcible interrogation, ‘What?’” Other interpreters were tried, but eventually, admitted Bingham, “the necessity of having an interpreter, not connected with the mission, became obvious and”, he confessed, “my being rejected became a matter of relief to me” (Bingham 1981: 508-9).

During this audience Du Petit-Thouars had asked the King why Bachelot had been treated so harshly. “The King replied,” said the captain, “that it was not he who had maltreated them, and that he had simply upheld a decree already adopted during his minority.” The Frenchman may indeed have felt he was boxing with shadows, for Kamehameha here referred him to the decree of Ka‘ahumanu, who in turn had been influenced by the omnipresent Bingham.

It was at this point that Du Petit-Thouars added a footnote to his text (1840-43 [1]: 339) saying that the Catholics were “described by the Methodist missionaries as the enemy of the populations of Havaii [sic]”, and “... like pagans and, in some way, like a kind of malfeasant beast”.

“Before the discussions of the day were through”, however, wrote Bingham, “the company got into some confusion, as some papers which Captain Thouars wished to put into the King’s unwilling hand, were allowed to fall to the floor” (Du Petit-Thouars 1840-43 [1]: 338, Bingham 1981: 509). Kamehameha, caught in the midst of this Franco-American cross-fire, was beginning to manifest his confusion physically. All this conflicting foreign

intervention in his country's life-style was beginning to take its toll, and indeed these may be the early signs of a deep depression which he would suffer later. In a less serious context the subsequent scene could seem quite a burlesque. Du Petit-Thouars did indeed hand the King "a written note".

The King took it at first, but some chiefs and missionaries rebuked him for this. The English consul... took it out of his hands for some reason. I immediately invited him [the consul] to give it back to him, which he did. But the King looked quite frightened, and didn't want to touch it any more. The consul placed this note on the King's knees, but it slipped to the ground. An officer picked it up and gave it back to me [Du Petit-Thouars] and I gave it back, once again, to the King who accepted it a second time. He took it, however, only with a feeling of fear." (Du Petit-Thouars 1840-43 [1]: 340)

Bingham claimed that this officer had approached him and,

...clapping his sword, said, with a malign stare, 'Do you see this? Do you see this?' intending, doubtless, to give the impression that, should all arguments fail to introduce Romish teachers, the sword could accomplish it.... The King subsequently asked me, 'Would the United States make war with me if that Frenchman had killed you?'

The American had reassured the King that "they would surely enquire into it first". He then recalled how Kamehameha "had alluded forcibly to this commotion in his letter to William IV [in September 1837] as 'the near approach of battle'" (Bingham 1981: 509).⁴ It may thus have been this "commotion" which had caused Kamehameha to accept the Frenchman's note for the second time "only with a feeling of fear".

When Du Petit-Thouars arrived in the islands he had in fact expected to be able to thank Kamehameha "for the gracious promises he had made to Captain Vaillant...". However, he wrote, "what was my surprise on learning about the violent and inhumane way in which a Frenchman [Bachelot] has just been treated. Nevertheless," he continued, "I fear that some persons may have abused their influence in order to induce the King into error on this question."

On the 22nd of July a second meeting got under way. "Mr Bingham was not in the room," noted Du Petit-Thouars—until he noticed that his adversary was "in a small adjoining closet, where he could hear exactly what was going on". The Frenchman was accompanied by Englishman Captain Edward Belcher of the warship H.B.M.S. *Sulphur*, then in Honolulu harbour, and both men requested that the Catholic priests be allowed to stay. Finally, "after numerous difficulties", the King granted their request, and it was agreed that

written guarantees should be drawn up, and exchanged on “Monday 24th at 10 o’clock”. Kamehameha’s text (translated from Du Petit-Thouars’ French) read as follows:

We, Taméhaméha III, king of the Sandwich Islands, agree that Mr Bachelot may reside in the island of Oahu, without being troubled or molested, until he shall find a favourable occasion to leave this country...

Signed Tamehameha III

Du Petit-Thouars’ response was as follows:

The undersigned, ship’s captain, commandant of the French frigate the *Vénus*, promises, in the name of Mr Bachelot, that this foreigner will seize the first favourable occasion... to leave these islands, either to go to Manila, Lima or Valparaiso or to another part of the civilised world, and that, should an occasion not present itself, he shall be embarked upon the first⁵ warship [*bâtiment de guerre*] to visit these islands. Meanwhile, he shall not preach.

Signed A. du Petit-Thouars

Bingham managed to see this as a triumph, saying that Du Petit-Thouars had thus “concurred officially” in Bachelot’s final expulsion, and had agreed to restrain his essential function, that of preaching.

The Frenchman, however, pressed for time (for he was leaving that same evening), then negotiated—“after long debates and difficulties”—a convention of just one article with Kamehameha, which was drawn up in both French and “*Kanak*”.⁶ It was dated July 24, 1837:

There shall be perpetual peace and friendship between the French and the inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands.

The French will be able to go and come freely in all the states which comprise the government of the Sandwich Islands. They shall be received and protected there, and shall enjoy the same advantages as the subjects of the most favoured nation.

The subjects of the king of the Sandwich Islands shall also be able to come to France. They shall be received and protected there like the most favoured foreigners.

*Signed: Taméhaméha III
du Petit-Thouars*

(Du Petit-Thouars 1840-43 [1]: 341-43, 345, 347-48)

Bingham, for his part, supposed (perhaps mischievously) that “It was doubtless mutually understood that fugitives from justice, deserters from ships, Romish teachers and armed invaders .. were not included in the pledge of free entry.”

“I let the King know”, said Du Petit-Thouars, “that I was provisionally giving Mr Dudoit the functions of agent of the consulate of France... because”, he declared, “Queen Kinau had, in my presence, threatened him with her vengeance after my departure.”

The awkward position of the Hawaiians, caught between the French and the Americans, was manifest until the very moment before the departure of Du Petit-Thouars, who wrote:

The King expressed to me the wish to come aboard the *Vénus*, and I asked him to come straightaway, as I intended to get under way at nightfall. He told me he was going to consult his chiefs, and he did not come.... He was prevented from doing so, for it was feared that he should see me alone. Mr Bingham has indeed too much interest in him not being enlightened as to his position, to leave him exposed to the points of view of foreigners. (Bingham 1981: 511, Du Petit-Thouars 1840-43 [1]: 348)

“At 7 o’clock in the evening [of 4 July],” concluded Du Petit-Thouars, “we left Honolulu Harbour, and set sails for Kamtschatka [sic]”, some 3000 miles to the north-west, in the very different climate of Siberia.

* * *

A few months later, as promised, the two Catholic priests also took their leave. Short sailed for Valparaiso on 30 October, and arrived there on 8 January. Bachelot left on 23 November, but died at sea during the night of 4 December.

On 18 December 1837 King Kamehameha III issued a severe “Ordinance Rejecting the Catholic religion”, and several converted Hawaiians were consequently set at forced labour (Alexander 1899: 223, Bingham 1981: 514, Du Petit-Thouars 1840-43 [1]: 395). All the hard work that Du Petit-Thouars had done, had thus been undone in less than five months.

EPILOGUE

It was perhaps inevitable that such continuous and conflicting pressures should bring about a deterioration in Kamehameha’s health. After Du Petit-Thouars’ departure, however, he would have even more difficult problems to solve.

On 10 July 1839 Captain Cyrille Laplace arrived in Honolulu on the 52 gun frigate *L'Artémise*. He came to lodge yet another complaint on behalf of his government. "In vain", he declared, "had the captains of *La Bonite* in 1836 and *la Vénus* the following year lodged strong complaints against... the government of the Sandwich Islands.... Scarcely had they left than the persecutions began again with renewed violence." It is improbable, however, that Laplace actually saw any such violence, for the American whaler *Elizabeth* had forewarned Kamehameha of *L'Artémise*'s arrival and, on 17 June 1839, the King had issued an "Edict of Toleration", declaring that no more people should be punished because of their religion.

Upon arrival Laplace learned from French consul Dudoit that "our rivals [as Laplace called them] had precipitously abandoned the town in order to withdraw... to the other side of the island. They thus abandoned," he said, "with neither counsel nor protection—to my mercy, as it were—the principal indigenous authorities of the island.... Perhaps they hoped", he wrote, "that, once *L'Artémise* had gone, they would quietly take up again where they had left off" (Laplace 1841-54 [5]: 433-39). In the meantime Kamehameha was left on his own—all the while knowing that his absentee counsels were not gone far, nor for long. Laplace demanded freedom of religion in the islands, and 20,000 piastres as a "guarantee" of good faith. If, he said, "the King, led on by bad counsels, should refuse to sign this treaty, then war would immediately be commenced" (Laplace 1841-54 [5]: 440, 533). Laplace also took Kamehameha's secretary, Haalilio, as hostage. Not surprisingly, the demands were accepted—and no "war" was required.

Three days before Laplace left Honolulu, the King visited him on *L'Artémise*. Kamehameha's confusion now appears to be complete, and his indecision here may indicate a deepening depression. He was certainly no longer master in his own domain. He explained to his host how he "was not strong enough alone to extract himself from the yoke of the [Protestant] missionaries who... had managed to render him completely incapable.... Why do you not stay a while longer with me?" he asked the Frenchman. "But no", he continued, answering his own question, "Just like the captains of the other French warships who have preceded you, you are going to leave and will not return." Laplace explained that he could not stay because he needed "to reach the north-west coasts of America before the bad weather closes our access to them". *L'Artémise* raised anchor and "set sail in the morning of 20 July" (Laplace 1841-54 [5]: 494, 497).

Nearly four years later, in February 1843, Kamehameha would come under pressure from English captain Lord George Paulet to cede his islands to the British government because, wrote Paulet to his Secretary of the Admiralty, "a French man-of-war was expected soon to arrive to take possession of the

islands" (Bradley 1942: 433). To avoid this cession Kamehameha had thought for a moment of ceding his islands rather to France or the United States, or indeed to both. The situation had become so desperate and confusing, wrote President of the Hawaiian Treasury Board, American Dr Gerrit Judd, on 27 February, that "the King declared himself a dead man, and expressed his conviction that his ruin was determined.... He would sooner give up all," said Judd and, "let them take the Islands" (Kuykendall 1968: 215). Five months later, however (on 26 July), the Islands were returned, after Queen Victoria had declared Kamehameha should "be treated as an *Independent Sovereign*" (Kuykendall 1968: 220).

For the greater part of the next six years relations between the French and the Hawaiians and Americans were friendly, and in March 1846 the 20,000 piastres given to Laplace were returned. By now, however, there were many Americans in the Hawaiian government. Judd held various portfolios, John Ricord was Attorney-General, Robert Wyllie was Minister of Foreign Affairs and John Young II was Minister of the Interior (Alexander 1899: 340). By 1849 new French consul Patrick Dillon felt he needed a French naval force to give him support, especially regarding the Catholic priests and the import duties on French wines and spirits. Accordingly, on 12 August 1849 Admiral Tromelin, Commander of the French Naval Division of the Pacific, arrived in Honolulu harbour with his "French Armada" (as Kuykendall would call it), the frigate *La Poursuivante* and the steam-corvette *Le Gassendi*. Tromelin dispatched ten demands to Kamehameha, saying that if a satisfactory answer was not received in three days then his officers "would employ the means at their disposal to obtain a complete reparation" (Kuykendall 1968: 393). Three days later a reply, courteously declining the demands, was received. The Hawaiian government also advised Tromelin and his officers that, if they were indeed to "employ the means at their disposal," no resistance would be offered.

That very afternoon (25 August) Tromelin sent an armed force ashore, took possession of the fort, occupied the custom house and other government buildings, seized the King's personal yacht and blockaded the harbour.

On the 28 August he received aboard *Le Gassendi* two commissioners from the Hawaiian government, Americans Judge William Lee and Dr Judd. No Hawaiians were present, and no solution was achieved. The occupation and blockade continued. The fort was dismantled, and Governor Kekuanaoa's house was ransacked. Finally, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Wyllie, proposed that the matter should be referred back to the French government in Paris. The French invasion came to an end. With little or nothing achieved, Tromelin took his leave on 5 September, with his "French squadron" (Kuykendall 1968: 395) as it would now be called.

In December 1850, new French consul Emile Perrin arrived in the warship *La Sérieuse* and, to everyone's surprise, made the same demands as Tromelin. Apprehension began to grow again among the Hawaiians, and the Americans and British determined to fire upon Perrin's ship if necessary. Perrin wisely decided to return to Paris for new instructions. When he returned in January 1853, he had been instructed to tell Kamehameha that the French government "will never have any thought of establishing over the Sandwich Islands a protectorate either direct or indirect, or of exercising there any exclusive influence, religious, political or commercial" (Kuykendall 1968: 407).

The Polynesian King could thus finally have peace of mind. Two years later, however, on 15 December 1854, he passed away, at 41 years of age and in the 30th year of his reign.

NOTES

1. Future king, Kamehameha III was born in August 1813.
2. William Alexander was, for many years, head of the Hawaiian Government land survey.
3. The translations of Du Petit-Thouars text here and throughout the article are mine.
4. William IV was King of England from 1830 to 1837.
5. "Kanak" was a word commonly ascribed to the language and people of the Pacific.
6. In his translation of this document, Bingham (p. 511) inserts here the word "French".

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ABSTRACT

During the first half of the 19th century the Polynesian rulers in the Hawaiian Islands were increasingly caught between the French and the Americans, as these two nations vied with intensifying hostility to gain support for their religious and commercial interests. The French on one occasion demanded a “guarantee” of 20,000 piastres, then took a Hawaiian notable as hostage, and later invaded Honolulu. In the early 1850s, however, French interest declined and King Kamehameha III, who had reigned over this situation for 30 years, could finally have peace of mind. He died in December 1854.

Keywords: Hawai‘i, French Catholics, American Protestants, A. Du Petit-Thouars, Hiram Bingham