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NATIVE, FOREIGNER, MISSIONARY, PRIEST
Western Imperialism and Religious Conflict in Early 19th-Century Hawaii

In the 1820s and 1830s, Hawaii's native rulers found themselves caught between two competing groups of foreigners. On the one hand, American and European merchants who resided at the islands—some who had been there since the 1790s—hoped to continue to use their close relationship with the chiefs in order to advance their businesses, while enjoying the relaxed moral atmosphere of the isolated island chain. On the other hand, American Protestant missionaries, who had arrived at the Sandwich Islands in 1820, worked to both "civilize" and Christianize the native population. These two sets of divergent goals led the opposing groups of foreigners into constant conflict, leaving Hawaii's chiefs, known as *Ali'i Nui*, to navigate a path for their people between the embattled foreigners. Under such circumstances, it proved inevitable that the chiefs themselves would become involved directly in the conflict. While missionaries, merchants, and Hawaiians clashed over a number of concerns, including prostitution and intemperance, the propagation of the Catholic religion at the Sandwich Islands served to focus the various strands of discourse on a single issue that brought the Sandwich Island rulers down the path of near destruction and drastic change.

On 9 July 1839, the French frigate *L'Artémise* arrived in Honolulu harbor. Its Captain, C. P. T. Laplace, had come to the Sandwich Islands to exact retribution from a people that his government believed had insulted the honor of the French empire. The islands' chiefs had endeavored on two separate occasions to force two Catholic priests—Father Alexis Bachelot and Father Patrick Short—from their island kingdom. Although only the former missionary was French and only a handful of Frenchmen lived at the islands, Laplace threatened to bombard Honolulu unless the *Ali'i Nui* met certain conditions. These included handing over a bond of \$20,000, allowing the Catholics religion at the islands, and overturning the kingdoms' abstinence laws and entering into a commercial treaty that limited duties on French brandies and wines to 5%. The close call with the French caused the *Ali'i Nui* to fear the loss of their sovereignty. Consequently, they quickly established a

parliamentary form of government with a constitution and a guarantee of individual rights as means of guarding their kingdom's independence.¹

Missionaries and merchants, their descendants, and historians who have studied the circumstances of this event have generally interpreted them in two ways. The members of the American mission and their supporters blamed foreign merchants at the islands and the French government for its gunboat diplomacy.² In contrast, foreign traders condemned the American evangelists for interfering in Hawaiian politics.³ Similarly, Laplace offered asylum to the foreign residents on board his ship, but excluded the Protestant missionaries because he held them responsible for the actions of the native government.⁴ When historians have interpreted the event at all, they too have accused the American evangelists of meddling.⁵ No one, it seems, has been much interested in the role that the Hawaiian chiefs played in the international incident that nearly led to French rule in Hawaii, fifty years before the United States took the islands.⁶ Yet, in the decade-and-half before the Laplace encounter, Hawaii's rulers negotiated a delicate and calculated path of diplomacy between to opposing groups of foreigners. It was their miscalculation as much as anything that Americans and Europeans did that almost cost them their island kingdom.

White traders and American Protestant missionaries had presented the Hawaiians with two competing visions of life. From the 1790s onward, foreign businessmen offered the Sandwich Islanders the material culture of western "civilization," while accepting the normative economy of the islands. A number of these white men also served as valuable repositories of commercial and military knowledge that the chiefs, especially Kamehameha I, used to advance their political and economic prospects. Yet these foreign merchants also sold the Hawaiians shoddy goods and cheated them in their business

1. *Manifesto to Kamehameha III from Laplace* (July 10, 1839), Foreign and Executive Office (Fo & Ex), Government Records Inventories (GRI), Hawaii State Archives (HSA).

2. See Samuel N. Castle, "An Account of the Transactions connected with the Visit of the *l'Artemise*;—Remarks on the Manifesto;—and the Treatment of the Missionaries," *The Hawaiian Spectator* 2, 4 (October 1839), Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library (HMCS). See also, J. Jarves, "Account of the Visit of the French Frigate *l'Artemise*," *The Hawaiian Spectator* 2, 3 (July 1839), HMCS.

3. Editor Unknown, *Sandwich Island Gazette* 3, 47 (June 22, 1839), 3, 48 (June 29, 1839), Hawaiian Historical Society (HHS)

4. C.P.T. Laplace, "Manifesto," *Sandwich Island Gazette* 3, 50 (July 13, 1839), HHS.

5. See Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 102-105; Gerrit P. Judd, *Hawaii: An Informal History* (New York: Collier, 1961), 56-57.

6. The Hawaiian historian, Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa suggests that the *Ali'i Nui* acquiesced to French demands because it was the *pono* (right) behavior. However, this is the extent of her analysis of the situation, Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa, *Native Lands and Foreign Desires: Pehea La E Pono Ai?* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1992), 176.

transactions. On the other hand, the American evangelists offered the islanders a competing vision of life that centered on spirituality and learning, rather than economics. Along with Calvinist religion, the missionaries proposed to teach the *Ali'i Nui* and common people how to read and write. With these tools of western civilization, Hawaiians could compete with the white men, ensure the fairness of commercial transactions, and survive in the strange new world in which they found themselves.⁷ At first, the chiefs endeavored to obtain as much as they could from both groups without antagonizing either. However, by the mid-1820s, the majority of *Ali'i Nui* entered into an open alliance with the Calvinist missionaries.

A powerful faction led by Kamehameha I's wife, Ka'ahumanu, seems to have calculated that an alliance with the American evangelists would bring greater religious, political, and economic benefits than one with the islands' foreign businessmen. A few months before the arrival of the missionaries, Kamehameha II and his primary chiefs had overthrown the religious cosmology that organized Hawaiian life. Known as the *kapu* system, the Hawaiian belief structure established the *Ali'i Nui* as gods on earth. As supernatural beings, the chiefs used taboos to enforce their rule over the *maka'ainana* (commoners) who worked their lands and supplied them with tribute. Since the discovery of the islands, foreign incursion had systematically undermined the islanders' belief system. Most white men existed outside the *kapu* system and did not suffer the consequences when they broke the taboos. This caused both the *Ali'i Nui* and commoners to lose faith in their beliefs. At the same time, Kamehameha II—who had inherited the rule of the islands after his father's death in 1819—was a weak monarch. Ka'ahumanu saw an opportunity to gain power by convincing the new ruler to overthrow the system that denied women the authority given to male chiefs.⁸

While she succeeded in removing the impediment to imposing female rule, Ka'ahumanu also eradicated the belief system that sanctioned the *Ali'i Nui's* authority in the first place. If they were no longer gods, what gave them the legitimacy required to rule? The arrival of the Protestant evangelists, and the death of Kamehameha II a few short years later, offered Ka'ahumanu the opportunity to rule and the legitimacy she needed. Kamehameha III was but a child and, until he reached his majority, Ka'ahumanu had the authority to

7. Various Authors. "Sandwich Island Mission Journal," typed transcript (January 9, 1823, January 28, 1823, February 3, 1823, October 11, 1823), HMCS. Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1981), 50.

8. For information on the overthrow of the *kapu* system, see Daws 53-60; Hawaiian Scholars, Lahainaluna High School, corrected by Sheldon Dibble, translated to English by Reuben Tinker, "Hawaiian History," part 2, *The Hawaiian Spectator* 2, 3 (July, 1839), HMCS.

lead in his name. By adopting Christianity and forcing the *maka'ainana* to attend mission churches, she instilled in them a new religion that bound them to "render unto Caesar what was Caesar's." Moreover, as a Christian, she could claim to rule in the name of the God worshipped by most western leaders, perhaps gaining legitimacy and respect in their eyes. At the very least, she and the other Christian chiefs secured the support of the American Protestant evangelists.

Ka'ahumanu and most of the other Hawaiian chiefs may also have adopted Christianity because it was politically astute to do so. By the mid-1820s, the *Ali'i Nui* found it progressively more difficult to rule. They faced an increasing number of murders, riots, and disturbances because of the white men who visited the islands. Drinking often instigated these acts. For example, on 15 December 1815, alcohol consumption resulted in a huge brawl between more than a thousand natives and a smaller number of foreigners.⁹ Or consider the battle between two inebriated crews of sailors described by John Colcord in the 1820s:

About this time in a midnight revel some men belonging to the Ship Daniel 4th of London were going on board their Ship [and] were hailed by some officers on board the American Brig Convoy. The men thought themselves... [safe] & gave a saucy answer. Stephens, Joiner & Perkins were the names of the three Mates who jumped into the Convoy's boat & gave chase to the men in the Ship Daniel's boat. A Battle Ensued. One of the men was beaten & thrown overboard & next morning was found lying across one of the Ships Cables. Drowned.¹⁰

Clearly, American and European men saw little need to control their behavior or show consideration for the laws imposed by alien rulers. Ka'ahumanu and the other chiefs may have believed that by taking on the mantle of Christian authority, they would gain the respect they needed to effectively rule over the islands.

Imposing Christian rule also resulted in economic benefits for the chiefs. While Kamehameha I had charged a tax on the native women who swam out to the ships for the purpose of "prostitution," by the 1830s, Christian chiefs fined both foreigners and natives for violating Christian laws. For example, the chiefs charged a white man, Captain King, "Ten dollars for behaving lasciviously," while they fined his native paramour thirty dollars.¹¹ They probably made a tidy sum, considering that in 1839 alone, more than 340

9. Marin, "Journal" (December 10, 1815) in Ross H. Gast, *Don Francisco de Paula Marin: A Biography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), 218.

10. John Colcord, "Journal," typed transcript, (November 22 or 23, 1826) 9, HSA. See also, Stephen Reynolds, "Journal" (November 23, 1826) in *Journals of Stephen Reynolds* 1, edited by Pauline King (Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Museum of Salem, 1989).

11. Captain King Adultery Trial, English translation (April 28, 1838), Department of the Interior, Misc., HSA.

people committed adultery, lewdness, or seduction.¹² In addition, if a white man wanted to marry a native woman, the Christian rulers required him to post a \$400 bond.¹³ If the man then wanted to return to his homeland without his wife, the new laws obligated him to pay \$2,000.¹⁴ The *Ali'i Nui* also fined foreigners and natives for fighting and breaking temperance laws.

If they had hoped that becoming Christian rulers would put a stop to the white men's disruptive behavior, the chiefs had made a dangerous miscalculation. Foreign merchants and sailors resented the Protestants' influence with the chiefs and they especially hated the fact that the Calvinists had convinced the islands' rulers to pass laws against prostitution, adultery, and intemperance during the 1820s. Until the *Ali'i Nui* adopted the evangelists' anti-Catholic rhetoric in word and deed, the anti-mission faction of foreigners at the islands found little support for their attacks upon the evangelists. Their desire to continue in their carnal excesses gave them little moral ground on which to stand. But, when the chiefs began persecuting Catholics, they gave the white traders their best means of winning what had become a war against the Calvinist evangelists. Unfortunately for the islanders, the foreign businessmen saw no problem with trampling over the chiefs and the kingdom's sovereignty in the process.

At the end of December 1831, when Ka'ahumanu and a number of other chiefs forced Fathers Bachelot and Short on a boat bound for California, the foreign community did not make as much of it as the might have. Both John Coffin Jones, the US agent for commerce at the islands, and Richard Charlton, the British Consul, offered to take the priests to California in return for \$200. Ka'ahumanu declined, pronouncing that the chiefs could send them for less money.¹⁵ In his official reports, Charlton declared that because the Catholic evangelists had committed no crime, expelling them "establish[ed] a precedent highly injurious to the British commercial interests in these seas."¹⁶ On the other hand, John Colcord, a blacksmith from New England, agreed with a fellow resident who felt happy to see the Catholics go because "We Residents have children here [...] and we do not wish them Brought up in Spanish superstition." [Colcord] Stephen Reynolds, a trader at the islands,

12. Unknown Author, "Crime at the Sandwich Islands," *Hawaiian Spectator* 2, 2 (April 1839). These statistics were extracted from a communication in the *Kumu Hawaii* of January 16, 1839. As the mission station published both journals, one of the missionaries, no doubt, wrote the article and supplied the statistics.

13. Alien Laws, 1838, Early Laws, HSA.

14. Early Laws, no date (1820s or 1830s), HSA.

15. John Colcord, "Journal," typed transcript (December 1831), HSA.

16. Richard Charlton to the Earl of Aberdeen (December 20, 1831), "Correspondence Relative to the Sandwich Islands," HSA.

mentioned the removal of the priests in his journal, but expressed neither approval nor disapproval of the chiefs' actions.¹⁷

It took the death of Ka'ahumanu in 1832 and the return of Bachelot and Short before the anti-missionary faction of white men at the islands rallied to strike back at their enemies, the American evangelists. In the summer of 1836, the foreign merchants established the first English newspaper in Hawaii, *The Sandwich Island Gazette*, in part as a means of antagonizing the Calvinists. The return of the two Catholic missionaries from California a year later gave the traders the fuel they needed to attack the members of the American mission. The *Ali'i Nui*, now led by the Protestant chief Kina'u, sought once more to rid their kingdom of the Catholics and to suppress their Hawaiian converts. Declaring that Bachelot and Short had landed in the Sandwich Islands without their permission, in May 1837, the chiefs sent members of the native militia to escort the Catholic priests to their vessel, the *Clémentine*.¹⁸

Both the French owner of the *Clémentine* and the local white merchants decided the time had come to act. As the Hawaiians rowed the Catholics out to the ship, Jules Dudoit and his crew abandoned the vessel. Probably as part of a coordinated plan, he took the ships' British flag—the vessel had been registered in Great Britain—and gave it to Richard Charlton who promptly set fire to it while surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. In the next issue of the *Sandwich Island Gazette*, headlines proclaimed, "INSULT TO THE BRITISH FLAG. Violation of the Rights of Three Nations! OUTRAGE UPON HUMANITY."¹⁹ But, it was not Charlton who received the blame for this act. On this and on numerous other occasions, the anti-mission faction claimed that the Calvinist missionaries, not Charlton, had burned the flag. They reasoned that because the American evangelists had caused the chiefs to take an anti-Catholic stance, the responsibility for the burning of the British flag lay on them [Mackintosh].²⁰

Over the next two years, the anti-mission faction continued to lay the blame for the *Ali'i Nui's* anti-Catholic stance squarely on Calvinist shoulders. They declared, "we look upon the native government as a misled child, and while we would ask all consideration for its liability to error, we would deny the duty of great forbearance towards men who would advise them to such piratical measures." [Mackintosh] They went on to question, "Who told the natives, from the desk, that the conduct of the late Queen Ka'ahumanu, towards the

17. Stephen Reynolds, "Journal," typed transcript (December 23, 24 1831), HHS.

18. Kamehameha III Proclamation (April 29, 1837), Fo & Ex, GRI, HSA.

19. Stephen Mackintosh, ed., *Sandwich Island Gazette* 1, 44 (May 27, 1837), HHS.

20. Ibid. See also, Richard Charlton to Tameahmeah III, British Consulate (May 22nd, 1837), Fo. & Ex., GRI, HSA; John C. Jones and William French, Protest re Clementine (May 22, 1837), Fo. & Ex., GRI, HSA; Duidot's Protest re Clementine (May 22, 1837), Fo. & Ex., GRI, HSA.

followers of the Pope, was right, and who recommend a repetition of that conduct on the part of the present government?" [Mackintosh]. Finally, the merchant faction concluded, "We leave time to prove who are the causes of this outrageous persecution: We leave the 'powers that be' to punish the guilty: And we leave the world to judge of the correctness of doctrines and creeds whose fruits are oppression and violence." [Mackintosh]

Even as the majority of the white merchants at the islands blamed the American evangelists for the chiefs' actions toward the Catholics, they worked to undermine the position of the Hawaiian *Ali'i Nui*. Richard Charlton, John Coffin Jones, and Jules Dudoit made sure that "Representations of the injuries received, at the hands of the Sandwich Island Government, to the interests and right of the subjects and citizens" of Great Britain, France, and the United States had been sent posthaste to those countries.²¹ At the same time, the publishers and editor of the *Sandwich Island Gazette* sent copies of their newspaper—with its salacious articles that railed against the bigoted intolerance of the Calvinist missionaries, and by inference, the Hawaiian chiefs—to American newsmen who supported their anti-Calvinist position. In response, the American Unitarian publication, *The Christian Examiner*, produced an article condemning the American evangelists in the Sandwich Islands. Other publications followed suit. In the two years prior to the arrival of Laplace and his French warship, both the Hawaiian government and the American evangelists had to contend with a constant barrage of criticism. Laplace's threat of violent assault and colonial subordination proved only the latest and most serious incident in a concerted attack to undermine the authority of the *Ali'i Nui* and their missionary advisors.²²

In the mid-1820s, Hawaii's leaders had allied themselves with American Protestant missionaries because they believed that it would best serve their interests. Clearly, Ka'ahumanu and her *Ali'i Nui* allies sought to gain political and religious legitimacy and social control by taking on the mantle of Christian authority. At the same time, they reaped the economic benefits of their imposition of Calvinist moral laws. Ka'ahumanu and the other chiefs, however, miscalculated when they underestimated the strength and power of the white traders who opposed their rule as Christian leaders. Using the power of the press and the pen, the foreign merchants in Hawaii garnered the support of a segment of the American public and the French government in their endeavors to seek redress against what the perceived as the chiefs'

21. Stephen Mackintosh, ed., *Sandwich Island Gazette* 2, 11 (October 14, 1837), HHS.

22. Stephen Mackintosh, ed. and Unknown Editor, *Sandwich Island Gazette* 2, 22 (December 30, 1837), 2, 23 (January 6, 1838), 2, 24 (January 13, 1838), 2, 25 (January 20, 1838), 2, 38 (April, 21, 1838), 2, 44 (June 2, 1838), 2, 45 (June 9, 1838), 2, 48 (June 30, 1838), HHS.

intolerance of the Catholic religion. In the process, they brought the *Ali'i Nui* and their missionary supporters to their knees. Because they had gravely miscalculated in their efforts to negotiate the delicate paths of diplomacy between two opposing factions of foreigners, Hawaiian chiefs were left with little choice but to remodel their government in the likeness of western nations or face the loss of their sovereignty to the French or other western colonial powers.