



HAL
open science

**Communards and “ Arabs ” insurgents against Kanaks.
Military engagements and contradictions within 1878
Kanak war in New Caledonia**

Isabelle Merle

► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Merle. Communards and “ Arabs ” insurgents against Kanaks. Military engagements and contradictions within 1878 Kanak war in New Caledonia. Fifth European Congress on World and Global History - “Ruptures, Empires, Revolutions”, Department of History, Corvinus University of Budapest, Aug 2017, Budapest, Hungary. hal-03524307

HAL Id: hal-03524307

<https://hal.science/hal-03524307>

Submitted on 13 Jan 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

NAME : Isabelle MERLE

**AFFILIATION : Aix Marseille Université
CNRS, EHESS, CREDO UMR 7308,
13331, Marseille
France**

E-MAIL ADRESS : isabelle.merle13@gmail.com

**TITLE OF INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTION : « Communards and « Arabs » insurgents
against Kanaks. Military engagements and contradictions within 1878 Kanak war
in New Caledonia.**

ABSTRACT (100 to 300 words) :

This paper will explore the positions of Communards and 1871 Kabyle "rebels" deported to New Caledonia in 1872 towards local Kanak population. Some were revolutionaries who had fought the conservative forces in Paris streets. Others came from Kabyle cities or villages following their leader, El Mokrani, to repel French colonial armies from their territory. We will examine how, once in New Caledonia, those men considered Kanak people who were themselves victims of French colonial pressure. How they reacted when they came to face the major 1878 Kanak war which swept the west coast and deeply threatened French settlers and colonisation process. Some and perhaps the majority of them enrolled as auxiliaries in French military forces to fight back the Kanak "rebels". Do we know why? Can we explain this apparent betrayal of their own cause? This paper will try to make sense of these colonial contradictions as far as historical documentation makes it possible.

CONTRIBUTION

When I send this proposal to the Fifth European Congress in Universal and Global History, I was not sure that it will be accepted "considering the astonishing number of qualified proposals received" as the organizers wrote it to me. But luckily, they found my proposal "very intriguing" and therefore accepted it to be part of the conference program. I would like to thank them for this.

Nevertheless I must say that I found myself rather intrigued by their questioning. It was indeed rather well known in New Caledonia that "French political deportees" and "Arabs" (as they say there) had participated without hesitation to the French military repression against Kanak insurrection in 1878 with only one notable exception, Louise

Michel, who openly defended the Kanak cause. Her position was intriguing among the vast majority of her companions of exile.

Few historians have tried to go further into the investigation and the attitude of French deportees had received much more interest than the Kabilian's one.

Jean Baronnet et Jean Chalou gave some insights in their book published in 1987 explaining the communard's involvement into the French repression by patriotism, fear of Kanak, disregard for their "treacherous" way of fighting or contempt for a primitive society moreover influenced by Catholic missions and clericalism.

The authors had obviously much less to say on the Algerians involvement. We have to turn to Germaine Mailhé's book which gave few information concerning their participation on the ground during the repression and proposed some explanations. Perhaps Algerians considered Kanak as their inferiors on the scale of humanity? Many of them had fought on the French side, during the confusing period of 1840-1860 in Algeria itself before turning against their ex-allies in 1871. Once in New Caledonia, their contribution to the repression could also contribute to their rehabilitation and facilitate their freedom.

Beyond these general comments, the aim of this paper is to inform about the actions and attitudes of political deportees, French or Arabs, through the precise analysis of two specific cases Charles Amouroux on one side and Boumezrag Mokrani on the other side. The idea is to enlighten their motivations and apparent contradictions once exiled in New Caledonia and forced to live in a new colonial situation. Amouroux, militant of the "internationale", trade unionist and mason or Boumezrag Mokrani, proud fighter in Kabylie against French colonial oppression, they obviously left behind their cause in New Caledonia to meet under the French flag in favor of the greater France. Both

illustrated a “special relation to France” despite their previous fights and revolts. Before going into those specific cases, let me first remind you few facts concerning 1878 kanak insurrections and its repression.

I- Insurrection of 1878

At the dawn of June 25th, 1878, the gendarmerie of La Foa which held the Kanak chief of Dogny was attacked. So started what we call the uprising of 1878. The same day and the day after, groups of Kanak on the west coast continued to carry out attacks on white settlements killing all residents, free settlers, convicts, deportees and even black domestics from Vanuatu. The Governor Olry wrote in his report that some deportees asked to be armed but he refused, except for a few guns given for their personal defense. According to him, deportees and convicts on the whole had a “good behavior”. They all knew, as he wrote, that “in this fight of the savage against the civilized man, they were threatened as much as free settlers.” Kanak insurgents made no difference between free and penal population as well as between farmers and domestic islanders. All were targeted for the colonial pressure whose Kanak were the main victims.

At the beginning of August, Olry finally accepted to arm 25 political deportees living and working in the area and decided to create a new company with them. The name of Amouroux did not appear in Olry’s report although Charles Amouroux was among the first to claim his will to serve. He and his company were sent on the east coast with officer Servan, one of the leading figures of French military forces in New Caledonia, to fight the insurgents, side by side with the pro-French Kanak from Canala. Servan himself testified Amouroux’s actions in a republican French newspaper in 1881. “His conduct” he wrote “was over any praise. In many circumstances, he showed a chivalrous bravery.” After the uprising, he was employed in making maps and drawing roads and was again congratulated by Servan for the quality of his colonial contribution.

In September 1878, Olry's report noted for the first time the presence of "Arabs" enrolled in the Bourail region. Forty men and some horsemen formed an Arab military column. He gave only few details. We know that this "Arab company" killed, among others Kanak, the chief Poo and chopped off his head. They killed also the chief Pikifara. A few other fights were reported but no proof of any participation of Boumezrag Mokrani in the governor's reports.

The convict's file of Charles Amouroux gives little information except for its sentence, two petitions for mercy, one refused in 1873, the second one accepted in 1879, in the following year of the Kanak uprising. But his participation in the repression is well known. It was described in detail in some newspapers. Officer Servan himself defended Amouroux's participation in the Republican newspaper *La Lanterne* in 1881. "La conduite d'Amouroux fut au-dessus de tout éloge. Dans plusieurs circonstances, il fit preuve d'une *bravoure chevaleresque*". Après l'insurrection, il fut employé à lever des plans et à faire des traces de routes. Ses travaux lui valurent des éloges mérités." Amouroux, devenu en Nouvelle-Calédonie un fidèle agent de la France coloniale, fut récompensé. Libéré, il retourna en France en 1881.

For Boumezrag El Mokrani, all the information needed are in his deportee's file. Boumezrag himself, wrote a letter to the minister of colony in 1882, in which he declared to accept his place of exile "where he could serve as during the uprising of 1878". Unlike Amouroux and most of the French political Deportees involved in the repression, Boumezrag did not get the right to leave the colony but only the freedom of movement within the colony. While his Kabyle companions were finally pardoned in 1895, fourteen years after the Communards, Boumezrag was held in New Caledonia in

1901, the governor de Nouvelle Calédonie supported his petition for mercy. He reminded the conditions of his participation to the repression in 1878.

“He was in Nouméa in 1878 when the insurrection started. He had come for a few days on permission from the island of Pines where he was interned since 1875. He offered spontaneously his services to Governor Olry who accepted them. He was given the command of a small troop of arabs, french convicts and deportees used as scout and according to the governor in more than an opportunity he gave considerable services to the authorities.”

II- Motivations

Charles Amouroux and Boumezrag El Mokrani had nothing in common apart the fact they had been both deported for political reasons to New Caledonia and were close in age, the first one born in 1843 and the second one in 1838. Amouroux was born next to Limoux in South West of France in a family of modest origins who moved to Paris where Amouroux spent his childhood. He became hatmaker before becoming fully involved in politics and trade unions as an ardent opponent to Napoleon the Third. Amouroux was a convinced republican but he was also a passionate patriot and fought the Germans during the siege of Paris.

Boumezrag Mokrani came from a prestigious kabylian family

They also shared another important, they had the experience of war and fighting. Amouroux fought against the Prussians during the siege de Paris in 1870 and then against the Versaillais during the Commune in 1871. Mokrani was a keen horseman

belonging to the powerful Mokrani family in Kabily, part of a warlike aristocracy, the Djouad, offrant leurs services aux suzerains de l'empire ottoman en échange du respect de leur independence absolu sur le fief en Kabylie.