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The Blessing of Lono: A Vision of Paradise in an Oklahoma Prison

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After a night of rain, morning broke clear and mild over central Oklahoma on Sunday. In a muddy prison yard near Watonga, a tiny town surrounded by wheat fields and cattle pastures, a group of men greeted the sun and prayed to Lono, the Hawaiian god of agriculture, fertility and peace.

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About 100 prisoners were silent as a conch shell sounded. They followed a leader for chanting and prayers in the Hawaiian language, welcoming the day and pleading for wisdom and forgiveness. They processed in the yard. Some dressed as their Hawaiian ancestors had, in togalike wraps tucked under bare arms. Others wore blue prison uniforms.

Separated from home by dense ribbons of barbed wire, a thousand miles of continent and half the width of the Pacific Ocean, the prisoners at Diamondback Correctional Facility would seem to be unlikely candidates to reawaken a faith that's been in eclipse in Hawaii since missionary days. But there they were, marking the end of Makahiki, an ancient three-month festival timed to the rising and setting of the Pleiades.

The incongruities are piled up, thick and mysterious: these inmates, many of them not particularly devoted to any faith, have found God - or gods, rather - in a medium-security private prison in the land of the Cheyenne and Arapaho after being locked up for robbery, drug dealing and other felonies. They have been helped not only by native religious teachers, community organizations and legal advocates back home, but also by volunteer ministers from the United Church of Christ, a denomination whose roots include the Congregationalist missionaries who tried so hard to destroy the Hawaiian religion two centuries ago.

Sunday's ceremony came about after a two-year struggle. The Corrections Corporation of America, which runs Diamondback, had resisted giving the inmates permission to meet and conduct liturgies, in deference to state officials in Hawaii who had expressed doubts that the Hawaiian religion still existed.

Officials said meetings could be a cover for gang or drug activity. In 2003, the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, a nonprofit group in Honolulu, sued in federal court on behalf of 33 Diamondback inmates from Hawaii, accusing officials of violating their constitutional rights and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, a Clinton-era law that sought to tilt the scales in favor of religious practice in conflicts involving zoning decisions and prisons.

A federal judge ordered the prison to allow a simple Makahiki opening ritual last fall and the closing rites on Sunday, the Hawaiians' biggest service yet. A settlement of the lawsuit has been nearly worked out, the inmates' lawyer, Andrew Sprenger, said yesterday. He expressed confidence that Hawaiians would soon be free to meet and worship as other inmates do, not only in Oklahoma but also in the other states where Hawaii has farmed out inmates for years: Arizona, Mississippi, Minnesota and Colorado.

That will be a victory both for religious freedom and Hawaiian culture. Christianity remains the dominant faith among native Hawaiians, but far older traditions have hung on, passed down through stories and songs. Hawaii is several decades into a renaissance of traditional music, dance and language. The Hawaiian religious revival encompasses all three.

Skeptics point out the contradiction between worshipping Christ and Hawaii's multiplicity of gods - besides Lono, there are Kane, Ku, Kanaloa, the volcano goddess Pele, a universe of other deities and demigods, and a lively spirit world. But many Hawaiians - even kumus, or traditional religious teachers - don't see a problem. Hawaiian religion stresses a primal connection to family, community and the land - gut-level values steeped in the islands' ancient history and culture. An overlay of Christian monotheism won't hurt that, the Hawaiians say - or change it. The inmates' liturgy was written with the help of John Keola Lake - kumu in residence at Chaminade University, a Roman Catholic institution in Honolulu.

Kaleihau Kamauu, an inmate who helped organize the Native Hawaiian Spirituality and Culture Group at Diamondback before being returned to a prison on Oahu, attended Catholic and Mormon churches as a child. He recalls being told by prison officials that he could be whatever religion he wanted, as long as he chose only one. He resisted. "I'm not saying what I'm not anymore," he said in a telephone interview yesterday. "I'm just going to say what I am."

To Mr. Kamauu, traditional worship helps restore a sense of ho'oponopono, or righteousness, for men who have disrupted a spiritual balance in themselves, their families and their communities. His group, he says, enforces strict rules about attendance and respect, and rejects gangs, alcohol, drugs and violence.

That is the spirit that moves groups like Ohana Ho'opakele, a Hawaii-based prison-advocacy organization that sent a spiritual leader to guide the Oklahoma service, and the United Church of Christ, whose ministers have been helping Mr. Kamauu and his fellow worshipers along. The Rev. Rosemary McCombs Maxey, a volunteer minister of Muscogee ancestry and one of the Diamondback group's sponsors, traveled from the other side of the state to be there on Sunday. The rites, as she described them, were conducted with the intensity of a fundamentalist revival meeting, but with almost monastic sobriety and restraint.

On Sunday night, the inmates gathered one last time. They chanted and danced a solemn hula. They sipped 'awa, a ceremonial drink, and ate poi. They sang. They had planned to end by dismantling the akua loa, a papier-mâché structure with a Lono effigy, but the music went on too long.

At 9 p.m., after the agreed-upon two and a half hours were up, the men were told to stop what they were doing and return to their cells.

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