A time to heal

Makahiki ceremonies allow inmates at 2 Oahu prisons to nurture their spirituality and Native Hawaiian identities.

The makahiki season is primarily a time to celebrate the harvest and pay homage to Lono, the Hawaiian god of fertility and rain, but for about 100 inmates at the Halawa and Waiawa correctional facilities, it's been an opportunity to identify and grow spiritually.

Kai Markell, who helped to arrange the celebrations at the prisons, also described makahiki in a larger sense as “a time of abundance, nonviolence, peace, diplomacy and healing.” The men in both facilities are now preparing hula, chants and other rituals to conclude the season in late March. They do the same in November to open makahiki.

“The amazing healing spirit present at these ceremonies not only helps to heal the inmates, but the guards, administration and families who are able to obtain glimpses of their sons, fathers and brothers making positive change,” said Markell, a manager with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs who documents the events.

Inmates at Waiawa Correctional Facility participate in makahiki rituals.

Spearheading the events is Kahu Kaleo Patterson, vicar of St. Stephen’s and St. John the Baptist Episcopal churches. He is trying to raise more volunteers, chaplains, speakers and supplies for the closing ceremonies March 20 and 21 at Waiakea and Halawa, respectively.

Patterson started holding chapel programs, offering Christian Bible study and other kinds of support, about 10 years ago, incorporating makahiki traditions at Halawa about five years ago and later at Waiakea, he added. His work at the prisons falls under the auspices of The Native Hawaiian Church, a project of the nonprofit Pacific Justice and Rec-
conciliation Center, of which Patterson is president.

His twice-weekly chapel programs offer classes in Hawaiian culture, history and language, and instill a positive self-identity and restorative character development, he said.

Some inmates who enrolled in writing programs shared their stories of self-renewal. Iota Brandon Lee wrote: “When doing the ‘Ai ha’a (a bent-knee hula), it helps me to express myself and brings me peace of mind. ... It helps to hemu (drive away) all the negative that builds up inside, in a right and positive way. Just hemu all the rubbish away.”

Jon Dudoit wrote, “The ancient Hawaiian hula that is being taught here at Waiau has taught me to be in unity and to have respect for one another. It has taught me discipline, to be very spiritual, and it helps me build my spiritual foundation. ... It helps me to be loyal to God, self, family and others.”

Markell, manager of OHA’s Compliance Enforcement Branch, said the first makahiki at Halawa started small, but more inmates signed up as trust developed over the years. The ceremonies grew in size.

And enrichment as more chants, hula, sporting games and rituals were added.

As a photographer who also documents these events, Markell said the men gradually allowed photos to be taken of their faces and permitted their names to be used as “the shame of incarceration left them,” adding, “Not only were they able to see powerful and positive images of themselves during the ceremonies, which they practiced long and hard for, their ohana were able to see them thriving, changing and reconnecting with their identity.”

Many paahao (prisoners) said they felt like strong Hawaiian men for the first time in their lives and tried to be “a good father, a good husband,” Markell said. “It was very healing and transformative, not only for the inmates, but for the guards, administration and all of us involved.”

In an essay, inmate Shaun Hew Len wrote, “Each time I do an ‘Ai ha’a or chant in Hawaiian, a piece of the old me is left behind and slowly a new me starts to emerge. ... It’s a way to express myself positively. ... (It) allows me to express the changing of the man inside.”

Dwayne Scritchfield wrote, “When I dance the Kahiko Ho’omaluhia Ke Aku, I feel the mana. I feel the spirit of my ancestors with me. I feel protected from my spiritual battle. I feel a connection to the men standing beside me. I feel hope and I feel closer to God.”

Hew Len, who joined Scritchfield and others in choreographing the kahiko dance, wrote, “If a group of men can come together
within the walls of a correctional institution and produce something that could impact positively our community, then anything can be possible."

To donate services or supplies, email Patterson at kaleop@me.com or Markell at kaim@oha.org.