

Inmates are allowed to celebrate Hawaiian tradition of Makahiki

By Carrie Coppernoll
The Oklahoman



WATONGA - Shivering volunteers handed two-foot ti leaves to prisoners bundled in blue jackets and knit caps. For a few hours Wednesday, the men stepped away from prison life to celebrate one of the oldest Hawaiian traditions: Makahiki.

"As the night fades," inmate Tyrone Kawaelani Galdones said, "so does our dirty past."

Nearly half of the 1,900 inmates at Diamondback Correctional Facility are from the Hawaii prison system, but few are native Hawaiians, Diamondback spokeswoman Sandy Clark said.

During the four months of Makahiki, Hawaiians celebrate the harvest, ban war and honor Lono, the

god of agriculture. For some prisoners, the prayers, chants and rituals of the beginning of Makahiki connect them to a culture an ocean away.

Ceremony includes language, songs

After a guard counted the inmates, prisoner David Monalim, wearing only a traditional kihei robe around his waist, started the ceremony by blowing into a conch shell. Barefoot and shirtless, he led the group to the eastern edge of the recreation yard, which happened to be the right field of the softball park. Monalim, 30, is serving time for weapons charges.

Hawaiian Kini Burke, who flew from his home state to help the prisoners with their ceremony, began singing. The men echoed and eventually joined him. Many wore traditional leis, made of green ti leaves and no flowers. A few made their own traditional robes and wore them over their heavy clothes.

They chanted, clapped and prayed under the security lights. Temperatures hung in the low 50s -- about 20 degrees cooler than in Maui. Intercom announcements and walkie-talkie fuzz reminded them they aren't free.

But they gazed forward, beyond the fences and barbed wire to the east, to the rising sun.

For native Kalai Poaha, Wednesday morning was a proud moment: "It takes me back to my roots."

Culture focus of season

Celebrating the dawn of Makahiki is special for Galdones, who spoke to inmates near the end of the ceremony. After he was sentenced to prison time for second-degree murder and sent to the mainland, he began to truly understand how important his culture is.

"It's part of who I am," he said. "It's an inheritance."

Now he's leaning on the Hawaiian teachings to help ho-o pono pono -- to make things right.

Richard Kapela Davis, 57, is doing the same thing. To Davis, who was convicted of robbery and weapons crimes, Makahiki is a time to restore personal strength and focus on life's blessings.

"It's a time to make things pono, to make things right," he said.

Keeping heritage alive

Davis said he feels he and other older inmates should help younger men learn about their heritage. Makahiki is one way to do that, he said.

The men speak Hawaiian and use a traditional greeting. They touch noses, exhale and inhale -- a cultural gesture some prison guards initially mistook for a gang ritual. The honi ihu, or "nose kiss," shows a special closeness among friends, Davis said: "You're trying to get the essence of the other person."

And connecting to one another and counting blessings is what makes Makahiki so important for these men who are 3,000 miles from home.

"We're all in here for doing something wrong: breaking the law," Davis said. "But we try to look beyond that. We're all native Hawaiian."