

RECONCILIATION, NOT REVENGE, WILL HEAL WOUNDS OF SLAVERY

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In the midst of the longest leg of the Hokule'a's around-the-world voyage, across the Atlantic from Africa to South America, I cannot help but think of the millions of Africans who, in centuries past, made the crossing in shackles, within the bowels of slave ships — and of the many more millions who never made it. In Brazil, our next destination following a stop at St. Helena, more than half the population is of mixed heritage. The majority have ancestors who were brought here as slaves by the Portuguese, initially to work on sugar plantations and later to work in gold and diamond mines.

Europeans brought 10 million to 15 million African slaves to the Americas, with the biggest portion arriving in Brazil. They came from Senegal, Gambia, Benin, Cameroon and Nigeria, but new information indicates that the largest group may have come from what is now Angola.

By far the greatest wave of slaves who crossed the Atlantic did so in the 1700s, but the colonial powers were active from the 16th century to the 19th century. African enslavement is truly an ancient offense however, beginning in Zanzibar in 700 when the first large-scale trading post was established. The Portuguese, who colonized Brazil, Angola and Mozambique, were the most active in the slave trade, but the Dutch, British, French, Spanish, Germans and Americans were all involved.

While in South Africa, I was surprised to learn that black Africans in that country were never enslaved either internally or transported elsewhere, but that the Dutch brought large numbers of slaves to South Africa from Malaysia, Madagascar and Indonesia.

Slavery was first formally abolished by the British in 1833, decades before the American Civil war, which resulted in abolition in 1865 in the U.S. Eventually all European countries followed suit. Yet, despite its prohibition, human trafficking continues to the present day in multiple forms, to varying degrees and with many motivations, all of which may be ultimately attributed to economic gain.

Whether wrought through slavery, war or domestic violence, anytime a human being, young or old, suffers major trauma, it might seem impossible to restore normalcy, trust and a sense of relationship. Regardless of the challenge, efforts must be made to heal and reconcile rather than seek retribution, which typically serves to perpetuate the cycle of violence. The world has witnessed these continuing vicious cycles among the Sunnis and Shiites and the Israelis and Palestinians.



Old slave auction blocks in Cape Town are shown with names engraved. The trees in the background were used to tie up those in waiting. The slaves brought here were from Malaysia, Indonesia and Madagascar.

The world also has witnessed reconciliation, however imperfect, between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and in the termination of apartheid in South Africa, as championed by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who last came aboard the Hokule‘a when it arrived in Cape Town.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who also came aboard the Hokule‘a after her two-year dry dock, often has said that during seemingly intractable disputes one should first seek to create familiarity so that both parties can see the human side of their apparent adversaries. Once trust is seeded, community is possible and solutions can be found.

It is then incumbent upon a society to facilitate a political process that includes not only democracy, but also meaningful dialogue, security and justice, including the elimination of corruption. Also, people must be connected to the land, including agriculture. The protection, preservation and perpetuation of the traditional cultural fabric are paramount as well. Public services including education and health care must follow. Glaring health and wealth disparities breed only despair and contempt and must be balanced. Efforts should be made to create a diverse, balanced and sustainable economy, not one simply based on exploiting natural resources. Microloans are an important way to jump-start a livelihood for those of modest means. The alternative is a breeding ground for a population to become disaffected and dangerously reactive.

Just before the Hokule‘a’s shove-off from Cape Town, South Africa, during an awa ceremony among our crew, a story was told about Eddie Aikau, who was lost at sea in 1978, near the beginning of the Hokule‘a’s second sail to Tahiti. Sometime prior to the 1978 voyage, Aikau had been invited to a surf contest in Cape Town. When he arrived he was told that he could not stay with the “white” surfers from the U.S. and that his accommodation would be with the “coloreds.” He still went ahead with the contest. Later, within the surf culture on the North Shore of Oahu, when Aikau saw racial discrimination toward visiting surfers of European origin, he graciously helped to ease the tension and made things right. This is a story of “Malama Honua,” of caring for the people of our blue planet, the mission of Hokule‘a’s around-the-world voyage.