

# Lessons to Learn from Niihau

By the Rev. Abraham K. Akaka

Pastor, Kawaiaha'o Church

WITH ALL DUE respect and aloha for our state Department of Education, it was with mixed emotions that I read reports of a recent visit to Niihau and its school, and felt two assumptions implicit in the article: (1) that Niihau's children, teacher, people and the Robinson family have much to learn from the outside world; and (2) that the outside world has little or nothing to learn from Niihau and its people. There is a trace of arrogance that came across to me that was both disturbing and a little amusing.

On Niihau there is no jail, police, locked doors, guns, crime, little if any drug abuse and mental illness, 100 percent voter turnout, no people and institutions hanging on the brink of moral and material bankruptcy. Is it not the better part of wisdom to pause and ask: Who has the superior lifestyle, society and school? Niihau or Honolulu? Who should be learning from whom?

It is on the side of prudence and wisdom to heed the advice of the mechanic to his apprentice: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." And we might add: Find out what is right about Niihau and use that knowledge to fix what is really broken in the outside world.

We on the outside of Niihau are part of a world whose political, economic and social systems are fragile and in many places broken.

Our leaders and many of us are highly educated, speak fluent Reaganese, Brezhnevese, Beginese, Arafese, Computerese, Robotese, Secularese, Religiese, Legalese, etc.

We are people who sell and buy at Armaments Supermarkets as nonchalantly as wives shop at food markets.

And with all our education, we have brought mankind and our planet into the greatest peril of and anxiety about extinction in history.

What needs fixing and direction? Niihau or this wild running outside world?

I BEGAN MY MINISTRY in 1943 at Waimea, Kauai. Dear ones from Niihau came to Kauai to shop, worship, *hoolauna*, (visit) with relatives and friends. I will always cherish the memory of beautiful people and times singing, worshiping, eating, and visiting with the Kanaheloes, Kahales, Kaohelauliis, Kaleohanos, Wailiulas, and others — times when I was refreshed and strengthened by their deep Christian faith and integrity, their childlike purity of heart and life.

The *keikis* (children) of Niihau who wished for schooling beyond the offerings of their Niihau School went to Waimea High School and Kamehameha Schools. Young people and families of Niihau were and are free to leave the Island if they wish, and to make their lives in the outside world.

Moe Keala, musician; Moses Keale, OHA trustee; Kanahale, art critic, are examples. They are neither prevented from leaving nor urged to leave. I found them free

*The privately owned Island is free from crime and tension. Honolulu and the world should have it so good, although the Department of Education found schooling deficient.*

to choose the course they wanted. But in all of our Niihau folk is a deep love for their Island.

When I was pastor of the Waimea Hawaiian Church on Kauai in 1943, Mama Kahale of Niihau brought her new baby to me for baptism. When I asked her the name of her baby, she said: "Kuleialohaikaainamalihini." I was puzzled by the name which means: "My beloved lei in the foreign land." When I asked her to explain, she said that her first-born child had been brought to Kauai for medical treatment, had died, and was buried on Kauai.



Abraham K. Akaka

Even Kauai was a foreign land to her.

THE ROBINSON FAMILY deserves great gratitude for their faithfulness, courage and love in fulfilling the responsibility given to them by King Kalakaua more than a century ago when he said: "My people will be yours. You will be their chiefs (responsible for their well-being). They will work for you and serve you according to the laws and customs of the king."

The Robinsons have placed humanitarian considerations above economic ones. There have been many bad years when the price of wool, cattle, and other products earned returns on investment that were below cost of production.

I wonder if many of Fortune's alii 500 corporations would have done the same, or just written off the "project" as a non-earner.

Since King Kalakaua sold Niihau to Elizabeth Sinclair and her family a century ago, the Sinclair-Robinson family has with great respect and affection spoken only the Hawaiian language to their people.

Said Valdemar Knudsen, who married Annie Sinclair, daughter of Elizabeth, when he was courting Annie on Niihau: "They are a wonderful race, superior to us in many ways. It never occurs to them to 'tolerate' us. After all we are the malihinis, the haoles. We have come in and taken over leadership of them. And they do not mind, as long as we are just and fair."

If anyone wants to see a truly beautiful face, look into Niihau eyes. You will see a purity of soul in which there is no guile or greed, racist intolerance or hate or fear, but only great love and acceptance. That Niihau face speaks of the love and wholeness that most of us wish we could achieve.

While we know that no one is perfect, and that even Niihau is open to improvement, I hope that our Department of Education will be very humble, loving and gentle on this one, so try to find out what Niihau would like, not impose.

Let us try very hard to be sure that we are not trying to fix what ain't broke. Niihau is the last spot of native purity Hawaii has left. We all share responsibility for its preservation and perpetuation.

Aloha to all our beloved on Niihau, in our Department of Education, and you, who take the time to ponder this point of view about Niihau. God's love enfold you.