

The 'Aumakua — Hawaiian Ancestral Spirits

by Herb Kawainui Kāne

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Research on Polynesian canoes and voyaging led to his participation as general designer and builder of the sailing canoe Hōkūle'a, on which he served as its first captain. Hōkūle'a has made a number of round trip voyages to South Pacific destinations, including a 16,000 mile pan-Polynesia voyage to New Zealand and back, and a trip to Rapa Nui (Easter Island), all navigated without instruments.

In 1984 he was elected a Living Treasure of Hawaii. In the 1987 "Year of the Hawaiian" celebration, he was one of 16 persons chosen as Po'okela (Champion).

Herb was a member of the state's Shark Task Force, and wrote this paper for the other members to explain the cultural significance of sharks.

Pre-Christian Polynesians saw themselves as the living edge of a much greater multitude of ancestors who, as ancestral spirits, linked the living to a continuum going back to the first humans, to the major spirits, and thence to the ultimate male and female spirits that created the universe. To Polynesians there was no supernatural; the entire universe and all things in it, including spirits, were natural.

Mana was the force that powered the universe – expressed in everything from the movements of stars to the growth of a plant or the surge of a wave. Human *mana* – manifested as life force, charisma, inherited talents, intelligence, and other virtues – flowed down the same hereditary channel of seniority from the major spirits (*akua*) to the ancestral spirits ('*aumakua*) to living parents (*mākuā*) and their children. The inheritance of certain talents within a family was taken as evidence of *mana* being passed down the line of seniority. Canoe makers would pray to ancestors noted for their skill as canoe makers; physicians would pray to ancestors who were famous healers; *kapa* makers would pray to ancestors who were outstanding artists in *kapa* making.¹

Authority was based on seniority—descending the channels of *mana* flow from the major gods to the youngest child. The elder brother's authority over the younger was challenged only when the elder acted with unwarranted cruelty or against norms of acceptable behavior—actions which signified that the elder had lost the *mana* which gave him the right to rule over his junior. Parents had authority over their children, and clan elders ruled the extended families. Chiefly clans, by virtue of genealogies connecting them more directly with the major gods, were considered as elder to the clans of commoners.² Both chiefs and commoners venerated their more illustrious ancestors as '*aumakua*, and sought their aid.

'*Aumakua* were invisible to the living, but able to possess or inhabit many visible forms, animate or inanimate. A rock or a small carved image set up in a family shrine within the home might serve as a resting place for '*aumakua*. The *momoa*, the pointed stern of a canoe hull which projects aft from below the rear hull covering of a Hawaiian canoe, was regarded as the "seat" for the invisible '*aumakua* of the canoe's owner.³ The war club of a famous warrior ancestor might be powered by his *mana* when wielded by a descendant in battle.

'*Aumakua* could also take possession of living creatures. Unusual experiences with certain fish, birds, reptiles, insects or mammals may have led some Hawaiians to regard certain animals as forms favored by their '*aumakua*. Thus it was believed that ancestral spirits could make appearances to express parental concern for the living, bringing warnings of impending danger, comfort in times of stress or sorrow, or in other ways being helpful. This is not to say that an entire species was regarded as '*aumakua* – only that an individual animal might be possessed by an '*aumakua*, and then only as the occasion might demand.

Some families, for example, believed that the spirit of an ancestor could appear as a shark, perhaps to chase fish into their nets, or to guide a lost canoe to safety. This does not imply that these families regarded all sharks as their '*aumakua*; neither does it mean that a particular shark was an '*aumakua*. To be precise, it means that an '*aumakua* had chosen to take possession of a particular shark for a particular purpose. But for these families, the killing or eating of any shark was an act of filial disrespect, for which the '*aumakua* might punish them by bringing sickness upon the transgressors.

Some *akua*, in particular Laka, Pele, and Hi'iaka, were – and still are – regarded as 'aumakua by certain families.

Both 'aumakua and *akua* dwelled in the Pō, the timeless, measureless, eternity which existed before the universe was created, and to which spirits of the dead returned. But some 'aumakua maintained a protective and beneficial parental interest in the welfare of their living descendants. However, if the 'aumakua were not paid acts of respect, they might, as indignant parents, visit some punishment upon the living, or they might simply lose interest and drift away into the limitless Pō, beyond the call of their descendants. One showed such respect by living in a manner that emulated the virtues of one's ancestors. One showed appreciation for having received an inherited talent by submitting to rigorous training, and by industriously applying one's skill. Such acts would attract the proud parental interest of ancestral spirits, who would reward their respectful descendants with *mana*.

Offering prayers in which certain ancestors were specifically addressed by their names also showed respect. Before the abandonment of the official religion in 1819, and the subsequent acceptance of Christianity, prayers to the major *akua* were often directed first to 'aumakua, calling them by name and invoking their aid to pass these communications up the line of seniority. That Hawaiians knew many of their 'aumakua by name well into the 20th century (Mary Kawena Pūku'i learned the names of 50 'aumakua as a child) is evidence that the acceptance of Christianity did not force the abandonment of 'aumakua beliefs.⁴ The explanation is found in the words of Christian doctrine. References to God as "Father," and the commandment to "honor thy parents all the days of thy life" found immediate acceptance from Hawaiians who perceived an area of agreement between the new religion and Polynesian extended family values.

Another act of respect was the sharing of food. All Polynesians propitiated ancestral

spirits by ritual feeding; spirits who were not "fed" would fade away beyond call. Foods were placed before small domestic shrines to thea 'aumakua, as well as upon altars of chiefly chapels and the altars within great temples to the major gods. As a boy, I knew a fishing family in Puna whose elder male carried food down to the shore every evening, where he called to a shark, and fed it.⁵

A charming folktale describes how two children, a brother and sister, were captured by enemies of their chief and tied to a stake. That night an 'aumakua came to them as an owl, and unfastened their bonds with its beak. Then it led them away, but cautioned them to walk backwards. The next day, their enemies could find no footprints except those that seemed to lead toward the place of their captivity, so the search had to be abandoned.

ENDNOTES

1. Many specializations were organized as guilds, each headed by a *kahuna* (leading expert, or master) who also served as interfaces between the living and the spirits, bearing gifts to the *heiau* and petitioning patron spirits of their guilds for *mana* for the living practitioners—very similar to the guildmasters of Europe, who, bearing gifts to the cathedral, prayed to the patron saints of their guilds for success for their members.
2. Of the five classes of Hawaiian chiefs, the highest ranking (*nī'aupī'o*) were those with the most perfect genealogies—clear channels for the flow of *mana*. This was vital to everyone, chiefs and commoners alike; all believed that success or disaster for the entire community rested on the capacity of their ruling chief to receive chiefly *mana* from the gods and his ancestors.

Commoners had chiefly ancestors, but they were commoners because their genealogies had become lost or obscured; thus the flow of chiefly *mana* was blocked and could not descend to them.

This belief formed the rationale for Pa'ao's conquest of Hawai'i. Arriving from Ra'iatea (then Havai'i or Havaiki), he found no chiefs

eligible to rule. He returned to the South Pacific, recruited Pili Ka'aiea, a prince of the highest bloodlines. With their champions they sailed north and made their conquest, installing Pili Ka'aiea as the progenitor of the dynasty of ruling chiefs from which Kamehameha I was descended 22 generations later.

3. Some modern canoe makers who are unaware of its significance omit the distinctive *momoa*. According to one story, the tradition originated when Mo'ikeha was leaving "Kahiki" (probably the Tahitian island of Ra'iatea) on his return voyage to Hawai'i, and a spirit ('aumakua) asked to accompany him. There being no room in the canoe, the spirit said "I will ride upon the small projection I see at the stern end of the hull."
4. In old Hawai'i, it was believed that words had a power of their own; prayers or invocations that were not delivered word-perfect would bring no benefit, and might indeed bring harm. The requirement that 'aumakua be addressed in prayer by their names has unhappy implications for Hawaiians who may wish to revive this aspect of their heritage, but who do not know the names of their ancestors or the correct rituals.
5. "The gods are dead," an elderly Maori said in a New Zealand Land Court hearing. "But gods cannot die," said the judge.
6. "They will die if there is no one who feeds them" said the old man.

SUGGESTED READING:

Nānā i ke Kumu, Pūku'i, Haertig, & Lee (Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center, 1972)

Ka Po'e Kahiko, Kamakau (Bishop Museum Press, 1968)

Prayers by which men and women contacted male or female 'aumakua were recorded by S.M. Kamakau. Originally published in a Hawaiian language newspaper in 1870, they may be found with translation in Na Pule Kahiko, Gutmanis, (Editions Limited 1983, pp. 16–17). Major spirits (*akua*) are called upon first, then certain 'aumakua, then the supplicant identifies himself or herself by name and the request is made. Another prayer is found in Nānā i ke Kumu.⁶