The ‘Aumakua —
Hawaiian Ancestral Spirits
by Herb Kawainui Kāne

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 (mōkua) 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.

‘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. 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 aumakua, 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 less Polynesian extended family values. The requirement that prayers 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.

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. 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.

2. Of the five classes of Hawaiian chiefs, the highest ranking chiefs 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 Havâilki), he found no chief eligible to rule. He returned to the South Pacific, recruited Pili Ka‘aiaen, a prince of the highest bloodlines. With their champions they sailed north and made their conquest, installing Pili Ka‘aiaen 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’iata) 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.

ENDNOTES

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.

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.

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 (aku) 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.

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