

# CALL TO THE SHARK



“Gaitani, where are you? Here are my magic leaves. Come and visit me. Swim in and stay.”

by Ben Cropp

*Above: An old chief in the Solomon Islands, Harry Galaiugu, waves his magic leaves and calls an invitation to his village's sacred shark. Only Harry and a few others still call the sharks, who, the islanders believe, embody the spirits of their ancestors. Opposite: The next day, a shark does indeed show up and allows Harry to hold its dorsal fin for a ride. [Lynn Cropp]*

NINETY-YEAR-OLD Harry Galaiugu deftly swung the canoe around to face the entrance to the lagoon. He was waiting for the sacred shark Gaitani to come in through the reef in answer to his summons of the night before. I was waiting with my cameras and a good deal of skepticism to film the old chief who, I had been assured, could call a shark to him. I had met Harry two weeks ago, when I first asked him to call Gaitani. That time the shark had not come, but Harry assured me that Gaitani had delivered a message to him the night before and would be visiting this morning.

Sharks have been synonymous with legends for centuries, and only very recently have divers and scientists looked at them with a perspective approaching reality. I had always placed shark worshipping, shark calling, and sacred sharks on the legendary side. But here, on the beach at Sandfly Passage in the Solomon Islands, I hoped to find a legend come to life—an old man who can talk to the sharks and call them to his side.

I was on a seven-month expedition to the Solomon Islands filming a series of five TV specials. My first show was to be “Call of the Shark”. We had already filmed sharks attracted to coconut rattles at the Trobriand

Islands, the frenzied feeding of sharks on tuna heads dumped at Tulaghi, and my diving crew actually hand feeding sharks. Now, I was searching the Solomons for the shark cults and the sacred sharks.

The story of my meeting with Harry had begun several days earlier as *Beva's* anchor rattled down through the clear lagoon waters opposite Togo Village in the Florida Group of the Solomon Islands. I had come to Togo because of a legendary sacred shark who lived nearby, a giant tiger named Tangale.

That evening after we landed, the village men brought out several guitars, and the children gathered round to sing us their special song of the story of Tangale in their own language. The song told that Tangale was a big fighting shark who guided and protected the people of Togo village in ancient times. They sang of the great shark returning to his home at Tanavula Point:

*When the moon is new and the current is strong at the point, there will be footprints of pretty girls near the bridge of stone. Under the shade of the trees, the leading warriors wash their weapons at the well.*

Near the Stone of Man and Rope of Snakes, mothers cut reeds and harvest yarns in remembrance of Tangale.

The seashores at Savola and the point at Avigole, show the signs of Tangale, in ancient times.

From the villagers' description of Tangale, I presumed the sacred giant to be a tiger shark. No one could tell me how long ago the events of the legend occurred. They simply said, "Him long time." They believed their sacred shark was still around, and any big shark sighting was of course attributed to Tangale.

The villagers used to throw sacrifices to Tangale, and we assumed that a series of sharks had probably become conditioned to swim close in and feed. We anchored *Beva* off Tanavula Point, and Wally Gibbins slipped overboard with his sacrifice—a bag of dead fish. Small whaler sharks were quick on the scene. We gave them several carcasses to stir things up and, we hoped, to entice a big one in. All we succeeded in attracting was another dozen small sharks. They were highly agitated and eager to feed, so Wally, deciding on discretion, emptied out the bag, and we moved back to watch the feeding frenzy. Tangale did not arrive; not a single shark over two meters turned up.

The Togo villagers raised my hopes again when they told me there was another sacred shark over at Takola Village, some ten miles west of here. And, there was an old chief there called Harry Galaiugu who could call this great shark to him.

WHEN WE ANCHORED off Takola, we found that Harry was away fishing and would return in the afternoon. In the meantime, the villagers praised Harry's magic shark-calling abilities. One man pointed to the exact spot on the beach where, sixteen years earlier, he witnessed Harry call in Gaitani. He said that the shark brought Harry a turtle. If this was all real, we had stumbled across an incredible relationship between man and shark.

Once again, before long a guitar and ukulele came out, and the villagers gathered to sing us their song of the sacred shark Gaitani. They sang of a girl named Kosagoa, who long ago became pregnant with a shark. She gave birth to the shark near a huge tree. When the wind blew, the tree's crossed branches rubbed together and sounded like a baby crying. The girl said, "We'll name the shark after this sound—we'll call him Gaitani."

The baby grew up with his mother in a small pool in front of Takola village. Gaitani soon grew into a huge shark and was always



The shark lightly bumped the frail canoe and swung a little to glide alongside. Harry casually reached over and grasped its dorsal fin, and for a few moments, the canoe was carried along.

hungry. He began to eat anyone who passed by.

Gaitani's uncle then ordered him to leave so that his people would be safe. Gaitani kept moving from place to place all over the Solomons, but still he kept on killing and eating people.

At the island of Guadalcanal, Gaitani came face to face with the strongest and most famous of sacred sharks, a big beast called Beasavu. There was a great fight, and not only did Gaitani win, but he stole Beasavu's wife as well. After this victory, a contented Gaitani, having proved himself, returned to his birthplace and never again killed any of his people.

As the song ended, a shout turned our attention to the beach. Harry was returning. He sailed in with an ingenious makeshift sail—a palm frond propped upright in his small paddle canoe. When he reached the lagoon, the "sail" went overboard and the paddle came out.

We greeted the legendary shark caller on the beach. He was an amiable man, with the dignity and rotund waistline befitting a chief. Harry was quite agreeable to try and call in Gaitani. First though, he needed to relax his mind by chewing betel nut. What's more,

the essential magic leaves had to be gathered.

Once everything was ready, Harry made an impressive figure as he waved his magic leaves and called out to his sacred shark.

"Gaitani, where are you? Here are my magic leaves. Come and visit me. Show yourself, swim in and stay. Stay day or night, my grandfather. This custom money is payment. Don't miss it Gaitani, I give you my word, O my grandfather."

Harry told me he had now to wait for dusk to receive an answer from Gaitani. The shark would rock Harry's canoe if it intended to visit him the next day.

I was up early the next morning to see if Gaitani had agreed to come. Of course I was very skeptical. There was no sign of the shark, but old Harry was paddling out to *Beva*. Harry explained that Gaitani had failed to acknowledge his call, there was no chance of him coming today. I asked if there was likelihood Gaitani might come another day.

Harry was confident and told me that if I was patient I would certainly meet Gaitani. I arranged to return in two weeks. In the meantime, Harry said, he would visit the high priest and pay him some custom money



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also. I was still very skeptical about the old chief's claim, but I would return. I had met too many witnesses stating this legend was fact.

WE TRAVELED NORTH from Sandfly Passage to Malaita Island. I anchored Beva behind Laulasi Island on the Malaitan coast to investigate a shark-worshipping cult which still thrives there. The shark calling that was once widespread throughout the Solomons is today only practiced by old Harry and at Laulasi by several high priests.

Laulasi is a strange little island, totally man-made of slabs of coral rock piled on top of a coral reef. Heaped-up coral rocks form a fortress wall circling the entire island. Inside this compound nestles a cluttered village with narrow streets running to openings in the wall through which they launch canoes.

There are many of these strange man-made islands along this coast. They were built last century in the peak of the head-hunting days. The only escape from the fierce highlanders was to go to sea. The highlanders did not have canoes, and here the coastal natives were safe in their Venice-style villages out on the reef.

Lynn, my wife, and I went ashore on this strange island to meet Bosikoru, the main shark-worshipping high priest. I had heard several testimonies to this priest's magic, all of them hard to believe. At their last Maoma feast, Bosikoru reinforced the village shark cult by calling in over a dozen small whaler sharks. He was assisted by the sacrifice of a dozen pigs, their blood and entrails tossed in the water.

As we walked between the rows of huts on Laulasi, we saw most of the population busy at their main industry of shell money manufacture. Women sat around chipping the red shells of the local oysters into tiny squares. Others deftly used primitive drills to make a hole in each piece and thread it onto a long string. The six-meter-long rough necklace was stretched out on a plank, and another villager slowly and laboriously ground the necklace round and smooth using soapy water and a hand-held hollowed grinding stone.

Each of these lengths of shell money is worth about twenty dollars. With a standard bride price of \$150 throughout Malaita and other Solomon Islands, a bridegroom must buy seven or eight strings to give to the bride's parents. Only Laulasi and neighboring Alite Island manufacture this shell money, which is worth some \$25,000 annually to each of the two villages.

I watched the men in action out on the reef, collecting the red-shelled oysters. They wore primitive goggles and worked from

canoes. The oysters clung to the coral five to eight meters down, and the men broke them off with a stone. Out on the open reefs, these primitive divers would ordinarily be vulnerable to a cruising shark. Here, with these shell divers, lies the background to the whole shark-worshipping cult.

The natives of Laulasi worship their ancestors, who take the form of guardian sharks. All sharks are sacred to the Laulasi people, and they do not kill them. In return, their guardian sharks protect them when they dive for the red-shelled oysters. Shark worshipping continued in Laulasi while it eventually died out elsewhere, because Laulasi has always been the center for shell diving, and acquiescent sharks are good for business.

I know from my own experience that any frantic kicking by a swimmer can send out distress signals which will attract and excite a shark. I watched these divers closely when a reef shark cruised in. There was no reaction at all—no frightened agitation which might draw the shark in. The natives were indifferent to its presence, and the shark swam past and away. Here, the shark cult makes good sense. Secure in the belief that his priest has some deal going to placate the shark, the diver has no reason to worry. The shark may be the spirit of his own grandfather, here to protect him while he dives for the valuable red oyster.

I found high priest Bosikoru with his skulls. They form a collection of all the ancestral chiefs of Laulasi "reincarnated" now as guardian sharks. I asked this high priest if he could perform his shark-calling for my cameras. I offered to pay for the pigs he would need.

Bosikoru answered that his fee was \$500 for the one-hour performance. I declined. I will never know whether the Laulasi shark callers have a special gift of nature—or a school of conditioned sharks out there on the reef awaiting the next gullible European to pay for the feast and ceremony. We left the next morning to return to old Harry.

We found Harry hobbling in his garden with a great swollen leg. It was obviously coral poisoning from a gash sustained when his leg slipped into a hole out on the reef flat. The amiable old man was really sick, certainly not strong enough to call and meet his Gaitani. We brought antibiotics back from Beva, and Lynn, a qualified nurse, administered a full treatment course. The Solomon Islanders do not reckon time in hours, and the idea of a regular schedule was too hard to follow. Lynn went ashore every four hours to administer the next pill.

In three days the leg looked good, and Harry felt just great. He was eager to call

Gaitani again. His grandson brought out the magic leaves, while Harry dipped into his betel nut bag. Soon Harry was calm and dreamy—ready to call his friend.

"Gaitani. Where are you? Here are my magic leaves . . ."

Again Harry went through this ritual of waving the magic leaves seaward and calling to his sacred shark. At dusk he would paddle his canoe out to receive a message from Gaitani. We would know the answer first thing in the morning.

I WAS UP ON DECK very early. Perhaps I was hoping to see fins slicing the surface all around *Beva*. Harry was down on the beach looking seaward, so I jumped into the dinghy and slipped ashore. Harry pointed to where breakers were curling over the fringing reef. Harry was calm, but Jim, our translator, excitedly reported that Gaitani was out there. The shark would meet Harry soon on the beach edge when the tide rose a little more.

I had the cameras all ready when that big shark came in. The old man paddled his frail canoe along the beach edge, watching, waiting, then suddenly dipping his paddle to turn the canoe toward the approaching fin.

The big whaler shark slid alongside the canoe, slipped under the keel, and the fin reappeared quite close to the beach. The shark almost beached itself, but powerful thrashings with its tail pushed the bulk into deeper water, and the fin glided back toward Harry. I could clearly see the black shape of a four-meter whaler shark.

Canoe and shark met head-on, each the same size, one much more formidable than the other. The shark lightly bumped the frail canoe and swung a little to glide alongside. Harry casually reached over and grabbed its dorsal fin, and, for a few moments, the canoe was carried along with the surge of the shark.

We were stunned. My attitude changed from blatant skepticism to complete awe. In all my years of diving with sharks, I had never seen anything like it, while Harry had remained cool and confident through it all.

I thought about the possibility that this shark had been conditioned, but if the last calling had happened in 1964, I really do not know how. The shark could have been lured in by some kind of bait—but then why had only the one shark appeared? What I did know was that I was going to have to reevaluate my ideas of shark behavior as to what was fact and what was fiction.

*Ben Cropp is a photographer and writer and produces underwater television programs in Australia, where he lives. He last wrote for OCEANS on aborigines and dugongs in November 1982.*

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