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The early Hawaiians allowed retribution for attacks by sharks

First of two parts

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The death of a Maui woman, attacked by one or more sharks while she swam off Olowalu on Maui two weeks ago, has raised a furor in the Hawaiian community over the state's plan to hunt for the killers.

Most of the controversy settled after a healing ceremony, and after it was made clear the state sought to limit its shark hunt to the immediate area of the attack, and would attempt to target the shark or sharks involved in the attack.

But the issue raised the question of native Hawaiian attitudes toward sharks, and the proper response when they attack.

Native Hawaiians in the old days regularly fished for shark, ate shark, and hunted down sharks that had attacked humans.



SHARKS

On the other hand, there was also a sensitivity toward certain sharks, which were treated by some families as guardians or representatives of dead ancestors — *aumakua*.

Charles K. Maxwell Sr., a Maui radio announcer who first protested the shark hunt, said his primary concern was that the hunt be held with respect for Hawaiian tradition, and that it not turn into a wholesale slaughter of sharks.

"My great-grandmother was from Olowalu, and my father told me that our personal *aumakua* is

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a shark. I don't practice that. I'm a Christian and I believe in Jesus. But I respect the ancient gods of our ancestors," Maxwell said.

A range of native sources and reviews of Hawaiian literature suggest that individual and family circumstances had much to do with the way people dealt with sharks.

Evidence clearly indicates that there was no hesitation among early Hawaiians to exact retribution for attacks by sharks. But that retribution, in Hawaiian tradition, did not appear to expand into wide-scale shark kills in response to the acts of a single shark or small group of them.

In the story of Nanaue, the shark-man of Waipio Valley, there was no remorse and no pity among villagers once they identified the man who had been taking the form of a shark and preying on other villagers, said Rubellite Kawena Johnson, a respected Hawaiian scholar.

Nanaue had the mouth of a shark on his back. He wore a cape to cover it while he was on land. He would ask fishermen where they were going to fish, and then would take his shark form and eat them. Eventually, he was identified and killed. His body was cut into 1,000 pieces and burned, said Hawaiian artist-historian Herb Kane. In modern Hawaiian tradition, it remains bad luck to ask fishermen where they plan to fish.

Another tale involves Mikolo-

lou, the 'great man-eating shark, Johnson said. He was caught, and his body was burned in a fire. The Mikololou tradition is that the tail was not burned, and was thrown back into the ocean, where Mikololou was regenerated. To defeat Mikololou, the entire body, including the tail, needed to be destroyed, Johnson said.



Johnson

Johnson said the concept of seeking out and killing a shark that has attacked people is fully supported in Hawaiian tradition. There is a "common revulsion" toward such animals, she said.

"The purpose of the hunt is vindication. Restitution is implied. It is a reciprocity," she said.

And as to the state of Hawaii's idea of removing a known man-eater from the coastal waters to prevent any possible recurrence, "I think it's appropriate," she said, echoing sentiments expressed by many others in the Hawaiian community in recent days.

But a general killing of sharks in retribution for a single attack would be inappropriate, she said. The animals, after all, are not guilty in the sense of knowing they have done something wrong, Johnson said.

Sharks were an integral part of life in old Hawaii. They were hunted for sport. They were revered as family gods or guardians. They were fished for food, for their tough, sand-papery skins, and for their teeth, which were used for knives and affixed to weapons.

For many Hawaiians, certain sharks were the physical forms



Maxwell

allowed retribution

of helpful ancestors, or aumakua. The concept of aumakua is a complex one.

"The whole concept of the aumakua was that the spirit of a departed ancestor could return to help a descendant in a time of great stress," said Kane.

In a family with an owl aumakua, a particular owl might be the specific aumakua, but the spirit of the ancestor might also take the form of other owls to give warnings or assistance. Kane



Kane

said an aumakua was represented in "that particular visitation" and not all members of a species.

"The important point is no matter what the class of animal or individual animal, the aumakua is the spirit of the ancestor. It might be a centipede, lizard, butterfly, toad, rabbit, spider, owl or a rainbow," Johnson said.

But while an aumakua might be represented in a single visit, there were also continuing relationships. One of the most fascinating is the one involving humans and specific sharks.

"Down in Ka'u at Punaluu (on the Big Island), there was an old man who for many years would regularly feed a shark. Everyone assumed that there was an aumakua relationship going on," Kane said. Johnson said a person caring for a shark in that way is called a *kahu hanai*.

Similar stories are reported on several islands. Johnson said one of her ancestors on Kauai in the 1800s fed and cared for a shark. A turn-of-the-century report says sharks would protect their *kahu*, even

to the point of carrying them to safety on their backs.

Johnson tells of the tradition of an Oahu family with a shark aumakua. When children of the family went swimming, the shark would patrol just seaward of the children, prepared to protect them from other sharks.

Kane said that other Hawaiian families would respect the shark aumakua relationship and would not fish for that specific species in nearby waters, to ensure they did not catch that shark.

While an aumakua is an ancestor inhabiting a specific animal or form at one time, Hawaiian families hold certain classes of animals in special regard. In the Hawaiian tradition, an aumakua might use any member of that class of animals as its physical form.

Johnson said that a family with a shark aumakua, even if it's a specific shark, would tend not to catch or eat any shark. Shark fishing, for sport or otherwise, was common among other Hawaiians, however.

Some modern Hawaiians may know the class of aumakua with which they are associated, without knowing details or an individual, she said. Because of intermarriage, many people may have several classes of aumakua in their family lines.

But once a member of the family no longer actively cares for an aumakua creature, the relationship changes.

"The remembrance of the name of the aumakua shark remains through tradition, but the *kahu hanai* no longer contacts the shark. After many generations, you don't expect that particular shark to still be alive," Johnson said.

Tomorrow: Why the state wants to hunt down the killer shark.