

Sharks: Sunday F4

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embodiment of gods, family deities called 'aumakua.

But where does this belief fit today? How do contemporary Hawaiians, especially those who spend time in the ocean, reconcile the two conflicting views of sharks?

In Hawaiian, 'aumakua is defined as a benevolent guardian spirit or family protector. Though some view the practice as a religious one involving worship, most, like Maxwell, a Christian, regard it as a continuation of an ancient belief system, a cultural practice that does not interfere with other religious beliefs. Its prevalence today is difficult to determine, often varying according to the age of the person to whom you speak. Nonetheless, for those who have a relationship with their 'aumakua, it remains a powerful force.

"An 'aumakua was actually a dead ancestor's spirit that was deified into an entity," explained Maxwell. "Could be clouds or trees or animals." But the best known of the 'aumakua seems to be the shark. Why? "We're ocean people," said Maxwell. "In ancient times, you either lived in the mountains or the ocean. The owl, the eel and the whale were also famous 'aumakua."

thousand years. "It would be a cultural insult if I asked my parents, 'How did we get this 'aumakua?' You're just told." Western man, he said, "thinks everything has to be in black and white to be fact."

Beyond the stories, Silva said that there is "usually some kind of sign," when an 'aumakua makes itself known, by behaving in a non-threatening manner, or even coming to the aid of a family member in a dangerous situation. The recognition between human and animal is instant and mutual.

Where the 'aumakua resides is usually determined by a significant family event that occurred there. "Maybe the family had a miscarriage or a stillborn and sent the fetus or the child out to sea," said Silva. "Or maybe the family had a drowning. Wherever this event occurred, if a sea animal showed up in that area, this is generally seen as a reincarnation."

The affinity is often so strong that older family members make significant efforts to introduce their children and grandchildren to the relative who resides in the ocean. Silva said she knows of a man in Kona whose grandfather led him on a diving expedition into a specific cave to acquaint him with their shark 'aumakua.

Not all are 'aumakua gods

1/14/2001 TTHA

will not speak about their 'aumakua with anyone outside their families. Ka'uhane Lee, a canoe paddler of Hawaiian, Chinese and Tahitian descent and owner of the Lomi Shop, agreed: "It's kapu to have (your 'aumakua) known," she said. "It's only known for certain reasons and purposes."

Maxwell believes that many actively practice these ancient Hawaiian beliefs today, but Brown, who is also Hawaiian, thinks the observance of Hawaiian culture and religion is not as prevalent in modern society. "Because of Christianity, everything has been diluted." He believes it's harder for people of his generation to hold onto their culture. "There is a renaissance now, but it will never be as strong as it was in the old days."

thought to appear in that form, for if they did, they knew the punishment could be as severe as death.

Alla practices this belief, with some rare exceptions. "I make it a policy not to kill sharks," he said, "though he does believe that there is an appropriate time to kill a shark if there has been a series of attacks in one area. He reconciles this practical approach with his cultural beliefs, as long as there is a good reason for the hunt, and all of the shark gets used. "The same teachings that would not let you use a piece of land destructively is the same philosophy that does not let you take something from the ocean and waste," he said. He has joined some shark hunters for two reasons: to do away with a bad shark and to make sure his 'aumakua was not harmed.

How does this belief in a pagan deity mesh with the conversion of many Hawaiians to Christianity? Former national champion free diver Wendell Ko, of Hawaiian and Chinese ancestry, remains conflicted. "If you believe in a higher power, you know that you'll be protected," he said. "But I don't think that a cultural belief in pagan gods and Christianity can exist together."

Power of sharks

For many in Western society, Hawaiian cosmology in general, and the concept of 'aumakua in particular, is too far out of their experience.

"It's a different perspective on the tie of life within different life forms," said Silva, who acknowledged her struggle to define these concepts.

"Sharks are powerful. They have the ability to harm and take life. But they also have the ability to give life. We often don't look at things in terms of the whole harmonic realm."

Both Maxwell and Silva believe that ancient Hawaiians' relationship with the environment helped them connect more readily with their 'aumakua. Said Maxwell: "In ancient times, there was one penalty for polluting the ocean or taking things out of turn: death. Every wind, every piece of land, every cloud had a name and a story. Hawaiians could talk to the trees, mountains and the animals, and they would answer. But we've lost that." In fact, he said, every Hawaiian "has an 'aumakua, and sometimes two — from their mother's side and their father's side — but most people don't know."

Hawaiians did kill sharks, but only for specific purposes, and given that they used nothing more than a canoe and a spear or fishhook, obviously they took sharks in small quantities. And they wasted nothing. Leighton Taylor wrote in "Sharks of Hawai'i — Biology and Cultural Significance" (University of Hawai'i Press, 1983)

that Hawaiians used the teeth as cutting tools, ate the meat of the shark, and used the skin to stretch across ceremonial drums.

However, Maxwell has written, "In ancient times, families were careful not to eat certain forms of animal life if their 'aumakua was

'Blood relationship'

This does not mean every owl or shark is an 'aumakua. And even if a shark is your 'aumakua, "not every shark is going to be gracious to you," said Carol Silva, a researcher of Hawaiian culture. "Aumakua are identified very specifically by body markings, and are named. They are part of the family. There is a direct connection, a blood relationship."

William Aila Jr., a Wai'anae fisherman for most of his 42 years, compared the relationship to the feelings a person might have for his elders. "When you're in a difficult situation, don't you recall the lessons that your grandparents or great grandparents taught you?" he asked. "There's a thought that they'll be there to watch over you."

How is this unique and enduring tie to an 'aumakua determined?

Paul Brown, 35, a fisherman, free diver and teacher at Kaimuki High School, said his family's 'aumakua can be traced several generations back to his roots on the Kohala coast at 'Upolu Point on the Big Island.

Maxwell said that his grandmother fed the sharks, and everyone knew the sharks had been their family's 'aumakua for several

Their ocean

Ko sets aside the religious questions and takes the practical approach when in the ocean: careful diving and respect for the ocean. "If there's too much sharks, we just pick up and go somewhere else. But they hardly bother (us). Last week we had to poke a shark a couple of times, and after that he left."

Ko's philosophy is simple: "It's their ocean, yeah?" Despite his deep ties to his family's shark 'aumakua, Ko's fellow free diver, Paul Brown, tends to focus on the same common-sense issues.

"There's an awareness and a sense of respect," said Brown. "I think a lot of it has to do with remaining calm, and choosing the right conditions (clear water, for example) for diving. Sharks can sense your heartbeat. They can feel vibrations in the water, and they feed off that."

Though he will kill a shark if he has to, Brown said that most of the time, like Ko, he will "pick up and leave" when he senses trouble.

Maxwell feels the same deference, yet finds harmony in blending his cultural and Christian beliefs. "When ever he enters the water near his 'aumakua, he chants and prays. "I don't worship the mano, but our culture is alive, which is why we have to respect."