

Praying to the *aumākua* as link to the *akua* seems logical. For one of the ways the first *aumākua* were said to originate was by the mating of *akua* and mortal. When a child was born to this union, the *akua* became an ancestor to a human line. He took on a dual role. As ancestor-god he became an *aumākua* to his descendants. Yet he remained *akua* or impersonal god to non-related humans. The dual role was sometimes referred to as *akua aumākua*.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, even the major gods, Kane, Ku, Lono and Kanaloa were both *akua* and *aumākua*. Union of powerful gods with humans is said also to have created the chiefs who ruled by "divine right." The major gods were more often thought of as *akua* only; the *aumākua* role seems to have been lost, except by Pele, Hi'iaka and Laka. These three were usually accepted as both goddess and *aumākua*. Even today Pele is goddess to non-related Hawaiians and *aumākua* to descendants. To Mrs. Pukui she is *aumākua*.

Evidently in ancient times, there were not enough *aumākua* to go around, for prayers for acquiring an *aumākua* are recorded. One could pray for either a male or a female.<sup>2</sup>

family had

many aumākua

This scarcity of *aumākua* was not to be permanent. Co-author Pukui memorized names of all her family *aumākua* as part of her childhood education. She learned a total of 50 names! With so many *aumākua*, the word 'ao'ao was used to designate the spiritual ancestors on a specific side or branch of the family.

kino lau,

many forms

*Aumākua* were also called "po'e o ka pō," people in the night or dark, therefore, "invisible people." However, *aumākua* could assume visible, tangible forms because of their ability to take *kino lau* (many bodies; many forms). The *akua* also had this ability. *Aumākua* took the form of sharks, owls, mud hens, lizards, eels, and indigenous small field mice, caterpillars, even rocks and plants. They could change back and forth from animal to plant to mineral form. The *aumākua* that was a *pe'elua* or *enuhe* (caterpillar) on land became the *loli* or sea-cucumber in the ocean. The *aumākua* inhabiting the body of a certain animal might also inhabit a plant that had either visual resemblance, similar characteristics (slippery, clinging, rough or smooth) or symbolic resemblance because of similar name. The *aumākua* in the mackerel or 'opehu was also associated with a variety of the lobelia plant with leaves shaped and colored like the fish, and called 'opehu.

kākū'ai

described

Traditionally, Hawaiians could transform a deceased member of the family into a special class of *aumākua*. This was done in the ceremony of *kākū'ai*. Mary Pukui describes *kākū'ai* as her forebears practiced it:

"... They would take the bones after the flesh was all gone, wrap the bones in red and black tapa, and take them to the volcano. Then the *kahuna* [priest] would prepare the 'awa [Hawaii's ceremonial drink]... After the

'awa had been poured into the crater, the bones were thrown down there. For generations, some of our folks were taken there. Later, others who were related to the sharks were given the *kākū'ai* ceremony and their bodies placed in the sea. The *aumākua* shark was supposed to take the bundle of bones, cover it with a belly fin, and care for it until that bundle of bones somehow turned into another shark.

"The last time my people conducted *kākū'ai* rituals was when my great grandmother was taken to the volcano. From my grandmother on down, we had earth burial," Mrs. Pukui explains.\*

A relative so transfigured became a particular type of spirit who served family *aumākua* within their own supernatural realm. For example, a relative consigned to the volcano became a flame spirit serving Pele. Living descendants did not call on these spirits for help. Though they were usually called *aumākua*, and sometimes loosely classified as *ʻinihipili*, they were generally considered unique spirit-beings.<sup>3</sup>

In other *kākū'ai* rites, a still-born or malformed live baby or a fetus could be returned to its *aumākua*. This is described in listing, *kākū'ai*:

For the early Hawaiians, the *aumākua* as invisible force or in tangible form were ever-present, permeating thought and action. The ritualistic care given the *piko* (umbilical cord) came, in part, from the knowledge that the cord had connected the baby with an living ancestor who after death would be directly linked *aumākua*. The *kapu* (taboo) against hitting anyone on the head or face was intertwined with the belief that good spirits—and the *aumākua* was certainly a good one—entered the body by the head. The many *kahunas* of the healing arts prayed to their *aumākua* for diagnostic insights. The child was taught which specific *aumākua* to call on for help. And when one man became an expert canoe maker and another an especially skilled fisherman, this was due only partially to individual training. The training was superimposed on the *mana* (special power or talent) each had received from his *aumākua*.

aumākua warned  
and protected

The *aumākua* also brought warnings of coming misfortune and deliverance from immediate danger.

If, for example, your family *aumākua* included the shark, you might have had an experience like this one, reported from the Puna District on Hawaii to anthropologist Martha Beckwith:

"... this one family... had a supernatural helper or *aumākua* who appeared in the form of a particular shark. When any of the family go fishing, the shark appears. The *aumākua* obeys the voice of man. Name the fish you want and it will bring it. This family can never be drowned. If there is a storm and the boat capsizes, the shark appears and the men ride on its back."<sup>4</sup>

Or Mary Pukui's personal experience:

"... in our 'ohana, we were taught to observe the owl. Owls were among the family *aumākua*... If the owl cries in a strange way, 'eu'eu, that means 'get out of here today.' When I was in Puna, an owl came and lit in a breadfruit tree and cried 'eu'eu. I told the aunt I was visiting that I was going home right away, and I'm glad I did, because when I got home I found my *hānai* (foster child) was sick and feverish."

\*For other accounts, see listing, *kākū'ai*.

The same *aumākua* could also punish. One way to bring certain retribution was to eat the physical form of one's *aumākua*. Co-author Pukui relates: "There were things we could not eat because if we did, it would kill us . . . a cousin of mine defiantly ate a certain sea creature and said 'I ate the body of our *aumākua*!' He died a month later."

Though this death 30 days later cannot be considered an illustration, the late Nils P. Larsen, M.D., speculated that sudden death or illness after "eating one's *aumākua*" might be "clan allergies," family-line allergic sensitivities reinforced by the Hawaiian practice of intermarriage within the *'ohana*s.

**illness was punishment**

Illness was often thought to be punishment sent from an offended *aumākua*. Breaking food *kapus* (taboos), bathing in pools that were *kapu*, violating the *kapus* of the menstrual period—all these could bring reprimands in the form of physical discomfort. So could behavior that impaired interpersonal relationships—greed, dishonesty, theft. Often there were "diagnostic clues." A swollen hand pained a thief until he made restitution. A sore foot told of "going where you were not supposed to be." An agony of pain in the scrotum betrayed the flagrantly unfaithful man. Psychosomatic ills were not limited to Western civilization.

The *aumākua* had many ways of expressing both warnings and displeasure. Says Mary Pukui:

**dream warnings**

"The *aumākua* makes its warnings, reprimands and guidance known in dreams, visions, physical manifestations, or just the nagging feeling that something is wrong. If you did something wrong unknowingly, you might be told in *hō'ike a ka pō* [revelation in the night, therefore a dream] or *hō'aiona* [sign or portent] while awake. This would be so you would know what you were punished for. Then you could correct your mistake."

This offer of a "second chance" suggests that the *aumākua*, even when displeased, were not vengeful. They forgave as well as chastised. Says one of Hawaii's earliest written accounts, ". . . if you have sinned against your guardian spirit [aumākua], with the root of the *awa* you could be forgiven. Then the anger of the guardian spirit would be appeased. . . ."

The *aumākua*'s many helpful, constructive functions strengthen this supposition. One such function was giving mental or physical strength when it was needed. To do this the *aumākua* entered into or possessed (*noho*) a human, in varying degrees and lengths of time.

**enabling concepts**

Three enabling-strengthening concepts are associated with the *aumākua*: *kihēpua*, *ho'oulu ia* and *noho*.

*Kīhe i pua* or *kihēpua*\* comes from *kīhei* (shoulder covering) and *pua* (flower). It is the "flower shoulder covering" the *aumākua* places gently over the helpless, the child, the sick, the aged. Or to use a later meaning of *kīhei*,

\*The term *kihēpua* seems to be confined to the Ka'u area of Hawaii, but the concept is generally known.—M.K. Pukui.

a "shaw" of help and comfort. It is the influence of one's *aumākua* that temporarily enables a helpless person to function and help himself.

Mrs. Pukui gives this example:

"A woman may be sick and helpless in bed. Suddenly she feels strong. She feels her *aumākua* is there—right there! She can get up, wash the dishes, straighten the house, do what must be done. After she senses the *aumākua* has gone, she is weak and sick again."

*Kihēpua* comes by itself, the unsolicited gift of one's compassionate *aumākua*. A somewhat stronger possession that enables is *ho'oulu ia*. This can be prayed for.

*Ho'oulu ia* is literally the "making to grow." Still far short of total possession, *ho'oulu ia* is a kind of inspiration. Here is a surge of strength and control that gets a job finished. That turns an acceptable bit of work into a superior one. That transforms a mediocre artistic endeavor into a superior, even superlative one. Laka, goddess of the hula and an *aumākua*, was invariably called upon to inspire the dancer to a better performance.

"Laka takes mild possession. She is dancing through the dancer," explains Mrs. Pukui.

So strong was this sense of Laka and dancer becoming one during the hula, that the *lei* the dancer wore became *kapu*. The dancer should not give her *lei* away or put another *lei* on top of the one dedicated to Laka. For as Mary Pukui quotes one serious hula dancer, "It is *our lei*. Mine and my *aumākua*'s."

A third type of possession is the total—but not permanent—possession called *noho* or *noho ia*. Other spirits, notably spirits of the more recent, known dead could also take possession. (See *noho*.)

*Noho* by one's *aumākua* may supply the sudden burst of "superhuman" strength that enables a mother to lift a heavy log before it crushes her child, or the "second wind" that helps the exhausted swimmer make it to shore. In the benign *noho* of the *aumākua*, normal capability becomes spectacular.

**agent of ānai (curse)**

The *aumākua* also carried out the curse (*ānai*) one person put on another.

In the "relatives beyond death" concept of the *aumākua*, it was understood that even spiritual beings were not heroic, helpful or admonitory all the time. The *aumākua* also had that most beguiling quality, a sense of fun.

"*Aumākua* could be capricious, mischievous and naughty!" says Mary Pukui.

But even the tricks of a naughty *aumākua* were without malice. For example:

A dignified, usually quiet man all at once becomes "the life of the party." Then just as suddenly he stops, thinks, "what came over me!" and becomes his old, stuffy self. Explanation: his *aumākua* was having a little fun through him.

Without any previous plan, a woman out on an errand finds herself going just the opposite direction. The errand is forgotten and she visits some friends instead. Explanation: Her *aumākua* was having a small adventure through her.

### Judgment after death

For all their appealing, human-like qualities, the *aumākua* remained figures of supreme authority. After death each mortal would know his *aumākua* as implacable Judge and jury. For the *aumākua* had the power to punish or reward the released spirit, or even to send it back to the body.

### eternity called Pō

As tradition tells it, when the spirit left the body after death, it traveled along the roads and pathways of the bodily host's own island and on to a *leina* or "place of leaping." And from there the spirit plunged into the sea of eternity or Pō.

And there, to quote Mary Pukui, "the *aumākua* would be, ready to welcome those in life who had not offended."

### revived after apparent death

Not all spirits made this prompt leap into Pō. For some, the mystical acceptance into the *aumākua* was delayed by the *aumākua* themselves. These were the spirits who left the body prematurely in what were evidently "apparent deaths." Says Mary Pukui, "Sometimes when it is not yet time to die, the relatives stand in the road and make you go back. Then the breath returns to the body with a crowing sound, *o'ō-a-moa*."<sup>\*</sup>

Entry into Pō would also be delayed by living relatives who constantly recalled the spirit by practicing *'unhipili*. (See *'unhipili*.)

The true unfortunates were the spirits whose earthly existence was found unworthy. Explains Mrs. Pukui:

"Those who in life had offended and did not try to correct the offense disgraced the *aumākua*. The *aumākua* would not bother with them. These became *ao kuewa*, homeless, hungry, wandering spirits, chasing moths and grasshoppers for food."

Spirits neither delayed nor judged unworthy found the *aumākua* waiting, some say in ghostly canoes, near the *leina*. For the Hawaiian conscious of a well-spent life, here was the ultimate, expected benevolence of the *aumākua*. For the final great leap from Now into Forever is an awesome thing, and without the welcoming *aumākua* the mist-veiled waters of eternity would be chill and strange indeed.

### welcome in Pō for the worthy

This, then, was the reward for a good life! Eternity with those closest to the 'ohana-loving Hawaiian, one's own ancestors. An eternal dwelling place in the mystic sea of Pō, and at the same time in the specific realm of family *aumākua*, whether water, or rock or sky or land or volcano.

The *aumākua* received their official dismissal notices more than a century ago when the Hawaiian people accepted the missionaries' Christian God.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>The Hawaiian's knowledge of resuscitation was considerable. See *o'ō-a-moa*.

But two questions persist:  
Did the *aumākua* really go away? Or did they just go underground?

### *aumākua* in the present

For the majority of Hawaii's present multi-cultural population, the *aumākua* are forgotten or were never known. For some, *aumākua* is a still-vivid childhood memory. A middle-aged Hawaiian businessman remembers going out with his father to feed shark *aumākua*. Another, when irritated, mutters softly, "may your *aumākua* take care of [meaning punish] you!" And for a few persons the *aumākua* still quite literally exist. Says Mary Pukui:

"I know families who even today make ritual offerings of young taro leaves and eggs to their *aumākua*."

For the Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian clients of the Center, and possibly their close associates, the *aumākua* have never quite disappeared. The "relatives" are still here, by implication. Many clients view dreams in the Hawaiian context as warning, experience waking visions or physical manifestations they interpret as portents, seek the significance of names (see *inoa*), use *ti* leaves to ward off trouble. Many have already consulted a *kahuna* (priest, healer) before they visit the Center, and at least one *kahuna* waits for guidance in a dream before deciding on remedial measures. In all these practices, the *aumākua* are traditionally present, even though the presence is today half acknowledged, or fully acknowledged but never called by name. Staff members speculate that clients most reticent about their *aumākua* may be the ones who more deeply believe in them and are influenced by their belief. This is in the traditional cultural pattern. As Mary Pukui points out, "Hawaiians didn't go around talking about their *aumākua*."

Clients who do mention *aumākua*, may say:

"I have *aumākua*. I don't exactly know which ones. They're just a presence. My *aumākua* have given me this *mana* [special power]. I have had it for 15 years. But since I turned to religion, the *aumākua* can't do anything. They're just there. The *mana* is there. But the *aumākua* can't interfere." (She meant interference to make the *mana* inactive.)

"I have a *mo'o aumākua*. My children are safe in water."

"I had this dream. I think it means I have a shark *aumākua*." (From a teenager).

More frequent are references to "spiritual" parents, ancestors or relatives, or statements that "my people are sharks," or "in our family we have *mo'o* people."

Since the time the *aumākua* (and *akua*) were "put underground" more than a century ago, a mixed crop of beliefs has sprung from the fertile soil of religious-mystic concepts. The just-converted writers-translators of the mid-1800s attempted Hawaiian-Christian hybrids. From these writings came efforts to make the *aumākua* guardian angels. The two concepts refuse to merge. As Mary Pukui points out, the guardian angel "transfer" leaves out the dominant ancestor-relative concept in which one's close family *aumākua* or 'ao'ao are known even by name. An *aumākua* is not just "a shark;" it is a specific named shark.\*

<sup>\*</sup>Not the name borne in life, but one acquired after becoming an *aumākua*. In contrast, the defined spirit of the recent dead (*'unhipili*) may continue to be "Kauane'a" or "Uncle Joe."

Today the most peaceful co-existence of *aumākua* and *akua* with the Christian God seems to be in prayers. Hawaiian and Christian prayers are sometimes said on the same occasion without any apparent conflict.

*is aumakua*  
super ego?

Obviously a concept as pervasive and deeply felt as *aumākua* must contain universal elements, ideas and beliefs closely akin to those of man in other cultures and other eras. The near-parallel often cited is that of the *aumākua* with the Super Ego of Freud and the conscience of Christian belief.

Opponents of this theory see the early Hawaiians' sense of right and wrong as coming from the externalized controls of the *kapu* system. The view seems to make little distinction between the *kānāwai kapu ali'i* or chiefly, man-made laws, and *kānāwai akua* or laws of the gods. At its extreme, an early chiefly edict ordered a man killed if he changed his body position slightly during a long ritual. Only the chief's own counter-edict could spare the man caught moving. Here was a crime-punishment control which took in no internalized temptation to transgress and no realization of wrong doing. Conversely, a man who broke a *kapu* of *akua* or *aumakua* could be told by a chiding, nagging *aumakua* that he had done wrong, that he must repent, and right the wrong. The process comes pretty close to "having a guilty conscience" and "squaring things with one's conscience." The belief that one who felt innocent could refuse to accept a curse or send back a destructive spirit, and the soul-searching of the *ho'oponopono*\* (all involving the *aumākua*) suggest a deeply internalized consciousness of right and wrong, guilt and innocence.

Dr. Haertig, our psychiatric consultant, sees the *aumākua* concept as including but not limited to functions of the Super Ego or conscience. He says:

"It seems important that these are family gods with names. Even though these people are in such dim and distant past that nobody alive ever saw them, yet they seem a somewhat mystical and externalized form of deeply ingrained family traditions, family mores, standards and values. All of these have similar broad standards in many families, but each has its unique variances within each particular family. I think this goes beyond the ordinary, limited concept of Super Ego.

"The concept has a similarity to the Oriental feeling for family traditions, perhaps some connection with the Orient's ancestor worship. And certainly it has a counterpart in Western culture, especially in English families who have lived, often on the same land, where generation after generation of ancestors have lived and died. One such Englishman told me, 'I have this sense of an actual physical presence. I can feel my ancestors approving or disapproving my actions... almost see them nodding their heads in approbation or shaking their fingers sternly.'

"In the Hawaiian *aumākua* are mystic entities with names. Yet operationally they are experienced as principles, values, standards. Undoubtedly these values and standards were taught Hawaiian children directly by their living family seniors and eventually internalized. Yet it goes beyond that. It

\*Prayerful family council to "set to rights" disturbed personal and family relationships. See listing.

is the feeling of a long, shadowy line of ancestors who exercise the seniors' prerogatives of guidance and judgment. It is the actual, felt presence of family."

Or as one Center staff member, a Hawaiian who attended a Christian day school and later earned a graduate degree, says frankly, "In the back of our minds, there's always the old. It does come back. You have a feeling that your ancestors are always here—always with you."

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Kamakau. *Ka Po'e Kahiko: The People of Old*, p. 28.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
3. This "special class" seems to have been the reason for confusing *aumākua* and *unhipipi* and even referring to *aumākua* as slaves who did the bidding of the living. It was the *unhipipi*, the spirit of the more recently deceased person that was believed to be summoned back to obey commands of its human keeper. In this belief, bones or body parts were kept and cherished, not put into volcano or sea.
4. Beckwith. "Hawaiian Shark Aumakua," p. 503.
5. Larsen. Personal communication with M.K. Pukui. Unpublished papers.
6. Fornander. *Collection of Hawaiian Antiquities*, Vol. 5, p. 608.
7. Though the old gods were publicly disavowed with the breaking of eating *kapus* before the first missionaries arrived, Kalakaua wrote: "While the abolition of the *tabu* system received the universal approval of the masses, the destruction of the gods and temples met with very considerable remonstrance and opposition... many gods were saved from the burning temples, and thousands refused to relinquish the faith in which they had been reared." King David Kalakaua. *Legends and Myths of Hawaii*, p. 438.

**'ēu**—fornication; a creepy, crawly feeling of the skin interpreted as a sign or portent. "It is the feeling that the hair on the head is standing up," says Mrs. Pukui.

Deriv: 'ēu, to crawl.  
See discussion under 'i'i 'ōuli.

**hā**—a strong expulsion of breath; to exhale; to breathe; breathe upon; breath; life. As ritual, connotes the imparting of mystic powers through breathing on recipient.

Deriv: unknown.  
Grandfather was dying, and the entire *'ohana* (family clan) was gathered around his sleeping mat. Soon the old man's spirit would leave his body to join the family *aumākua* (ancestor gods) in the eternity called *Pō*. But before this final moment, the patriarch, with almost his last breath, would impart his specific *mana*, his canoe-building talent, to a chosen descendant.

But now, *Kulikuli! Noho mālie!*\* (Hush! Be silent.) The moment has come. Grandfather motions his grandson, Kelala, to come closer. Summoning

\* *Noho mālie*. Literally, "Sit quiet."