An interview
with Parley Kanaka'ole

Parley Kanaka`ole was by far one of the most respected of Hawaiian cultural figures. Son of hula and Hawaiiana legend Edith Kanaka`ole, Parley worked to promote a deeper understanding of Hawaiian culture through his involvement in numerous community activities and organizations.

He was a member of the Protect Kaho`olawe Ohana. He helped restore ancient fishponds, assisted in archaeological mapping of historic and prehistoric sites, and served as a delegate from Hawaii at many gatherings of indigenous people from around the Pacific.

In addition to being vice principal of Hana High and Elementary School, he was a musician, composer, chanter, fisherman, farmer, poet and healer.

Parley was also a member of the state's Shark Task Force, and in that capacity he taped an interview about the significance of sharks in Hawaiian culture. The information was to be used in the Task Force's educational projects, and this is a transcript of a large portion of the interview.

Parley's life was tragically cut short by an automobile accident in August 1993 at the age of 52. According to his colleagues, he was "a shining example for all Hawaiians," and he embodied the best of humankind.

Regarding the relationship between Hawaiian people and nature

That's an important part of attitudes towards, not necessarily only the shark, but animals, rocks, inanimate objects, animate objects, those kinds of things. It's all part and parcel of the wholeness of who and what we are.

What was interesting, this weekend I had a group of Maori and they had come up. This woman is in charge of a, you know like one of our halfway houses they have. They have a lot of social problems with native Maoris down there. Anyway, they had come up to do a ceremony to reinstill with the men, especially with the men, spiritual values, you know some kind of spiritual values. And in as much as they are very culturally in tuned, that's the one portion that they lack. They're separate spiritually, to the environment, to the things of the Earth. Although culturally they know how to address those things. Mechanically they go through the steps of doing it.

And so we've had to, you know, reinstill in them the sensitivity towards sun, rain, wind, waves, ocean, you know, trees, rainbows, because for us, there are things that we call hō'ailona; you know, signs that reveal an unusual event. And one of these are in relationship not only to shark, but to other animals.

Particular characteristics of an animal that is unusual from its normal behavior are usually signs of a kupuna, or an ancestor who has gone away and has sought out an animal to show us, you know, living, things that we need to know. Not only does it come from those who are dead, but it also goes from us who are living, and we seek their help. And so it comes in the form of 'aumakua, we call it. And so if there are any animals that have a peculiar behavior, other than their normal behavior, those are the kinds of animals we seek out as being our kupua or 'aumakua.

There are certain animals that our people look at being as 'aumakua. Whether it be an owl, or a particular type of fish or shark, you know, and so we look at not only that one particular shark but all the species of shark as being sacred to that one family. Not all Hawaiians are the same, okay? And that is the tendency we have today. Go look up so-and-so because he's Hawaiian and he knows everything… And so they are the stereotype, but that's not particularly so.

Certain Hawaiians have certain sharks, and I say certain sharks, not all sharks, that they choose as their 'aumakua. Or that shark has chosen them as their 'aumakua, it works both ways. And so for those who are living, they not only look at that particular animal as being sacred, but all of its species as being sacred. You know, so the kapu is not for only that one animal, but for all other species of sharks is kapu that particular family. It may not be so for other families who don't have that as an 'aumakua, you know.

And so the Hawaiians look at all of nature as important, and they look at the signs of nature as messengers coming from their family who has passed on. Signs come in rainbows, double rainbows, odd forms of clouds, they read the roll of the waves and some of the waves are signs that they look at, you know. Those are things that the Hawaiian needs to be aware of in order to fulfill its connectedness to, you know, to its ancestors that have passed on.

So we cannot separate ourselves to the trees, we cannot separate ourselves from the waves and the ocean, from the clouds and its cloud-forms, from the mountains and the hills, the animals from the limu, to the pipipi, to the kūpe'e, you know, to the manō, to the pueo, to the 'i'iwi, to the 'o'o, all of these are all signs upon which we had better be aware of, because it is through them that we get messages from our ancestors.

Well, that is the attitude of our people today, okay, whenever you hear an outcry of, for instance, the Pele defense fund that we did for Waokeleopuna, you know, and for all the animals in the trees that is in Waokeleopuna. That is because there are families that have a direct kinship relationship not only to the place but also to the trees, the animals of that place. That may not necessarily be for other people who are of other islands, or other Hawaiians who are of other islands, you know. And so we have that idea that okay, this is a Hawaiian concept, so all Hawaiians think the same. It's not true,you know, it's not true.

This is true, all Hawaiians are sensitive to things that are natural. That is true. But when it comes down to the nitty gritty as to, you know, this is my ʻaumakua, then that person has got to know the name of his or her ʻaumakua. And the genealogy for that particular ʻaumakua. And unless that person doesn't know them, there really isn't any connection, real connection.

There may be an, what I call an ancestral memory to that connection. And that is something that you were born with that may have occurred to your ancestors in the past, and you don't know how to describe it, but it is still in you. And so when it occurs, you recognize it, but you don't know how to vocalize it. But it's still in you, you feel it. That is what I call ancestral memory.

So we have generations today, who may have ancestral memory of things that are past, but yet cannot physically describe it. But it is strong enough for them to act or do something about it. That's the other aspect of some of the Hawaiians that we have today.

In order to maintain one's relationship with the ʻaumakua, one has to constantly feed or either pray to or feed that particular ʻaumakua. However way the feeding is done, you know, one has to do that. Just as one has to go to church constantly, every weekend, and either give offerings, pay tithings, participate, partake of the sacrament, it's that kind of a relationship with God that one needs to participate in, in order to maintain that connectedness.

It's the same way with one's ʻaumakua. You have to practice, you have to participate, you have to feed it constantly, otherwise that ʻaumakua will no longer recognize you and it will go away. Just as much as if you would stay home from church for a year or so, that inside, you know, that spirit of connectedness goes away and you no longer feel that relationship. It's that kind of an idea.

So it's not so much that one does not recognize ancestral ʻaumakua; they may recognize it. On the other hand, does the ancestral ʻaumakua recognize that person, not having been able to make that connection for all generations. It works both ways.

A good example: if you have a favorite aunt... and you don't visit her at all, and the only time you visit her is when she dies. How close is that relationship for you to your aunt, if on the other hand, you've had a close relationship with her, all during the time she was alive, and she dies, how great is the grief to that passing?

I think what I'm trying to say is in everything we do, especially us as indigenous people to these islands, it's our close affinity to the land, and the sensitivity to that land, that really makes us aware of all that which is happening in and around there.

On recognizing ʻaumakua

In one's family, there's always a favorite aunt or favorite uncle. We have those in our family. Or there is always a person in the family that has domineering characteristics. Sometimes those characteristics are recognized as either being shark-like or recognized as being eel-like in characteristic, or recognized as being owl-like in characteristic. So when the person dies and passes on, we would recognize that person as having those kinds of characteristics.

Now whenever we see an animal that behaves differently, we would say, "Aw, that's just like aunty so-and-so" or "that's just like uncle so-and-so," you know. So that animal that behaves differently from its norm becomes the ʻaumakua, and we feel that that aunty, uncle, father, or grandfather have used that animal as a means to communicate with us.

There are a lot of stories that have come up where, well for one instance, my sister in her early years working as a teacher out in Kohala, would travel back from Kohala to Hilo. And this was when they had the old Āhua Road coming down from Waimea, and the old Kohala Road coming down from Kohala. And at times, and it was winding, Hāmākua Road was also winding; and at times when it rained really hard.

Well, this one particular time it rained really hard, and as she was coming down from Waimea to Honokaʻa an owl swooped right below her hood, and she jammed on the brakes. And the owl landed just ahead of the car and it flew off again. And she started off and drove off just a little bit, and the owl swooped down below, and three times the owl did that. Finally, on the third time the owl did that, the owl stayed by the road, the owl didn't fly off. She got out of the car although it was raining and walked out towards the owl only to look right around the bend that the old wooden bridge that used to be there wasn't there anymore.

You know, so we say, "Oh yeah, that's just like Uncle Solomon, he was always… she has always been the favorite of Uncle Solomon, so that must have been Uncle Solomon, you know, that's her ʻaumakua. It's that kind of attitude, that kind of mentality, that an animal would do that.

And so these animals were venerated, because they were family. And they became a domineering factor in the communication between those that have passed on and those that are still here. And a lot of times their roles was either to protect or to perpetuate, you know. And that's really the ʻaumakua attitude of our people.

And that's why I say, you know, if you don't keep contact with family, that's why in the old, in the Hawaiian culture, family is important, the extended families are important. So if you don't keep in contact with the family you lose that relationship. It's the same thing. You don't pray every day, you don't go to church every week, you don't participate, you lose that contact with the Almighty Being.

So for us, the ʻaumakua is really the guardian saint between me and the Almighty Being.

You know, if I have to learn how to make saddle, my grandfather was a good cowboy, he was a good saddle maker, rope maker, all around steer man. But if I had to make sad-

dle all over again, I would ask him for help, because he was a good saddle maker. And my prayers would be directed towards him. Just as much as if I were to travel somewhere and I needed help to get to someplace safely, I would ask my sister, "Hey, pray to our ʻaumakua to get us there safely," which is the pueo.

So us Hawaiians had plenty prayers to plenty ʻaumakuas; we were a praying people. So it wasn't hard when Christianity came for us to learn how to pray to one God, which is easier than to 40 thousand. I'm being facetious here, but you know that's really the case where today, we see that we really need an intermediary because there's a whole lot of people praying to that one God. So I think I'll call on my ʻaumakua to help me. He's got the inside because he's there.

Regarding whether sharks have signifi - cance beyond the role of ancestor

Oh yeah, sharks do. Sharks, the significance of a shark, especially with the niuhi, the tiger and the white shark, they were compared to as chiefs. Kamohoaliʻi, who was the brother of Pele, was a shark. That was his form, his other kino lau or his other form was a shark. Because of the ferocity.

The same kind of attitude of absorbing and taking all with no consciousness to end result, the main thing is to consume. The same attitude is compared, comparing the shark to love. It's all consuming. To the point where one cannot think consciously to what is being done. And so the Hawaiians have a saying:

Kūpau wau i ka manō ka manō nui ka manō nui kūpau wau i ka manō.

And it means, "I am finished to the big shark, all consumed by the big shark, I am finished."

It doesn't mean he's dead because the shark bit him. It means he is so deeply in love that he doesn't know how to think, you know? So shark has that other side of its attitude that is used by the Hawaiians to describe the all consuming idea, without consciousness.

And that is funny that the Hawaiians would also compare that to love. But they did that because they knew nature. Hurricane ʻIniki, all consuming, it has no bearing on who's the chief or who's the commoners, you know. It's all consuming. Hawaiians understood that, and they used that kind of proverbial idea, and I just use that to illustrate the insight and connectedness with nature. But in relation to the shark, that is how it is really used.