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Kumu Oli (Teacher of Hawaiian Chant)
Hālau Mele

Can you please introduce yourself? What is your name and what do you do?

I'm Sam 'Ohu Gon III. I am the senior scientist and cultural advisor for The Nature Conservancy of Hawai'i. I'm also a kumu in the hālau (traditional Hawaiian school) that was established by John Keolamaka'āinana Lake, and as the kumu of chant (kumu oli), it is my kuleana, my responsibility, to teach chant to any interested people--it doesn't have to be native Hawaiians--for use in today's world. We know that chant was the modicum of information exchange in traditional time, and so that continues today. I'm also a PhD in animal behavior, specifically behavioral ecology, so the role of animals in their natural environment, and their behaviors in that environment in the context of ecology. So that is my dual training, in both western academia, to the PhD level, and then, in Hawaiian cultural practice, to the 'ūniki level. 'Ūniki is when you graduate as a practitioner. So I've undergone the uniki hu'elepo to emerge as a Kahuna Kākalaleo, that is, a chant and traditional ceremony practitioner. So that's what I bring into this effort, both the expertise in conservation biology, as well as in cultural practices that are relevant to what we do today.

What are the main differences between Hawai'i pre-European contact, and Hawai'i today?

Sam 'Ohu Gon III

Hawai'i in pre-contact times was an amazing place. It was one of the pinnacles of Polynesian societies and island systems. Being isolated from the world, Hawaiian culture evolved in an amazingly rich place: more ecosystem types than pretty much any other single location on Earth. And that full range of ecosystem diversity also meant a very rich Hawaiian culture. Imagine living in an island system that goes from sea level all the way up to snow-capped mountains and covers from wet to dry, warm to very cold, and all the living things that occur in those places versus a low-lying coral atoll with maybe one or two coastal ecosystem types. You would have access to huge resources, and yet in a finite ecosystem. So for a thousand years, we existed in these islands, created a unique Polynesian society, and entered into a rich and sustainable, self-sustaining, relationship with these islands. That essentially meant that hundreds of thousands of Hawaiians lived in a small island archipelago occupying less than 15% of the land area to provide for 100% of our needs. Flash forward to today, where we have maybe a few hundred thousand more people living in the islands, but almost entirely dependent on the outside world. And at the same time, we've destroyed, on the island of Oahu where I live, 85% of the ecosystems which are now either in agriculture, or where people live, or have been displaced by invasive species, including mosquitoes, for that matter. Essentially, native Hawaiians lived in a paradise without many of the

pests that plague us today. And those pests, which transmit disease to people, have for nearly 200 years now, transmitted deadly diseases to our native forest birds. They have undergone a kind of biological genocide. If that were happening to people for 200 years, it would be considered a major crime, that nothing had been done about it. In our case, dealing with mosquito-borne diseases has been a challenge for everyone. Even dealing with human mosquito-borne diseases, we haven't had the tools to deal with mosquitoes except for applying huge amounts of pesticides in wetland areas which have damaging effects to the rest of the ecosystem, the non-target ecosystem. So only recently have we had even the ability to deal with the problem. Nonetheless, the differences between pre-contact Hawai'i, which was a socio-ecological system in which human beings were a part of all of the ecosystems of the island, and recognized how important that balance was in maintaining their own well-being. If the place that you lived in was unhealthy, then the people were considered unhealthy as well.

Can you please tell us more about the relationship between humans and nature in pre-contact Hawai'i?

Sam 'Olu Gon III

There was no word for nature in Hawaiian. That is because the idea of nature as something separate from people didn't exist in pre-contact Hawai'i. Human beings were part of a long chain of ancestry and relationship that went all the way back to the gods, and even before the gods. The Kumulipo, which is the Hawaiian chant of creation, a very long chant, in fact it would take you all day to chant if you chanted slowly, brings living things into a world that was created out of a spinning hot chaos. The origin story in Hawai'i is a fascinating one: from spinning hot chaos to the first invertebrates in the ocean, and then crawling and flying things such as birds. All of those come into existence and are named in the Kumulipo before the gods are mentioned. So the living things in the world exist before the gods, and the gods exist before people. So that makes the living things of the world ancestral even to the gods. And so in a society that reveres elders and ancestors, this means that the living things of the world are revered as much as, if not even more than the gods themselves. The gods can take on physical manifestations in the world in order to communicate with people, and those physical manifestations are always natural ones. They're always particular animals, like a shark in the ocean, or an owl in the sky, and the like. So with that kind of pilina (pilina is a connection, a relationship) -- with that kind of pilina between people and nature, in which there's no distinction between the two, and the elements of the natural world are considered the most ancestral aspects of your family, it's impossible to consider abusing the environment since that would be like abusing an elder. That also lends itself to the idea of no ownership of nature, or natural resources. The commodification of nature that came after Western contact quickly led to great declines in the integrity of native ecosystems and native species. It's an amazing thing how the replacement of one system of belief with another led to huge degradation of both Hawaiian environment and Hawaiian culture.

How were birds viewed or considered in pre-contact Hawai'i?

Sam 'Ohu Gon III

They were either the physical manifestations of gods themselves or the messengers of gods. It's difficult to distinguish between those two because in order to communicate with a human being let's say, a god could take on the form of a bird, or a god could send a bird to communicate with people. On this island of O'ahu, on the highest mountain, Ka'ala, that is the realm of a beneficent goddess named Kaiona. Even to this day, Kaiona is the patron goddess of people who are lost and in need of direction. And in modern times, Kaiona sends an 'iwa bird, the dark Hawaiian frigate bird, whose profile in the sky is almost like a pterodactyl. But in ancient times, Kaiona's bird was another dark bird, the O'ahu 'ō'ō, which is now extinct. And it's interesting to me that in an evolving culture, when the 'ō'ō was no longer available for Kaiona to send, it shifted over to the 'iwa, the frigate bird, which we still have with us today. So Hawaiian culture is resilient. Hawaiian ecosystems are also resilient if we recognize what the threats are and can deal with them in time.

You mention Ka'ala on O'ahu. Here on Kaua'i, we have the Alaka'i Plateau, and many people refer to this part of the Garden Island as the "Realm of the Gods". Is the "Realm of Gods" a common concept in pre-contact Hawai'i?

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The concept of 'Wao Akua', the realm of the Gods, and 'Wao Kanaka', the realm of people, is an interesting dichotomy in Hawaiian life. When you think about it, Hawaiians, like all Polynesians, are coastal and marine cultures. So great voyagers on the ocean, superb fishers who were paying attention to the elements of the world. So indeed, protein from the sea was the major source of sustenance in ancient Hawai'i, and in all Polynesian cultures. So the realm of people was along the coast and in the warm, moist lowland. The large valley bottoms were where the places where the staple foods of Hawaii were grown, taro for example, kalo it's called. And so above that, if you were a farmer standing in your fields at the bottom of the valley, or if you were a fisher on the coast ready to launch a canoe, and you looked up into the mountains, verdant, hidden in the clouds, in the realm of rainbows, it would be quite different - your comfortable setting down below - versus the wild, steep setting above. Kumu John Keola Lake said it very well. He said, "In the Wao Kanaka, that which grows on the ground is the result of people's cultivation. In the Wao Akua, people have nothing to do with the growth of the living forms that are there. Those are all manifestations of the gods, and therefore the Realm of the Gods". I was talking about how all the living creatures in Hawai'i were physical manifestations of the Gods. And so to look up at that place, where human beings had nothing to do with what was growing there, or what was living there, just underscores the fact that this is not a place where people are, or where people should be, except under need. And when you entered that realm, it was done with ceremony, and with as small a number of people as needed in order to see to those needs.

If Hawai'i loses the 'akikiki, if Hawai'i loses more endemic birds, what does that mean for the Hawaiian culture? What are the consequences for humanity?

Sam 'Olu Gon III

In Hawai'i, the living things of a place are not separated from the place. There are many chants and stories that mention very specific plants and animals associated with a particular place. The valley that I grew up in, that I was born and grew up in, Nu'uaniu, is associated with several different plants: the 'āhihi lehua, the kamahakala, the kāwelu grass growing on the wind-blown cliffs. All of those are mentioned repeatedly in the chants for Nu'uaniu, and therefore those living things ARE the place. They are the signature of the place. And if those things should cease to exist, then something of the place has been irrevocably lost. I have myself seen several different native birds that have gone extinct in my lifetime, and I think about how each of those had their role to play in the stories of those places in which they lived, and how much of a huge loss it is that we can no longer point to them, or see them, or hear them anymore. Part of the place has been destroyed when they were destroyed. Think of the Hawaiian feather work, the beautiful brilliant yellow, and black, and red, contrasting work of royal Hawaiian feather work. Of those species that were involved in their creation, only one of the four or five bird species that provided the feathers for those amazing pieces of art and ceremonial significance is still in existence: the 'i'iwi which provided the scarlet red feathers. The yellow and the black of the 'ō'ō and the mamo are history now. All we have are stuffed specimens in museums. Very few people alive today can remember hearing the last 'ō'ō on the island of Kaua'i, before it went extinct, before the turn of the millennium. So when you think about the fact that we're on the cusp of losing even more species, if the 'i'iwi should ever become extinct, and every single one of the birds that were responsible for our brilliant work were gone from the world, that would be an intensely sad day.

From a Hawaiian perspective, what would it mean if we were to let all these species die on our watch? Could it mean perhaps that our own extinction is a possibility?

Sam 'Olu Gon III

Our existence, as we know it, has changed drastically from pre-contact times. I think people are increasingly beginning to recognize that we live closer and closer to a precipice. We can no longer view the world as this place where we can just dump our trash and hope that it just doesn't come back to us, that it goes somewhere else in the vast ocean. We now know how finite our world is. As the quality of our environment goes down, so will the quality of our lives. It may be a long time before humans go extinct, but the existence of humanity that was enjoyed a thousand years ago will certainly be completely lost and completely changed. And human beings, as they existed then, will certainly cease to exist. We will live in a different kind of world, and to me, it is a world that is far less rich, far less engaging, and maybe far less desirable to live in. If all the people on Earth were hooked up on life support, and existing, rather than living in a rich environment and taking part in the care of that place, versus what we could be doing again, you know, interacting in a reciprocal healthy manner with our environment, then certainly what you're saying about human beings ceasing to exist is probably true. We go down as our places go down. Each of us,

no matter where we live, has a responsibility to care for the living things of our places, and ensure that they thrive, just as we do. Because as their conditions improve, so will our condition of life.

Can you please tell us more about caring? Why do you care?

As I mentioned, the more you embrace your place, the more you appreciate how much that place contributes to who you are. For Hawaiians, the place and the living things of that place equal your own identity. So for me, to go to a place and see the things that are the signatures of that place, to know that they still exist, and to know that there are still healthy, and contributing to the actions that maintain the integrity of that place, it's an amazingly positive thing. When I see native plants in people's yards, I'm moved to go up and knock on their door and tell them how much I appreciate the fact that they care enough to know that there are native plants that should be growing in that place, and that they've taken steps to ensure that those plants are still with us in the world. And the more we do that, and the closer we bring those plants and animals into our existence, the more they enrich our own lives, the more we can look out and say "Yes, there is an 'amakihi bird coming to my tree, in my front yard, drinking the nectar of the 'ōhi'a tree that I planted 25 years ago and is now taller than my house." It is something that I'm intensely proud of and feel so fortunate to have, and I want everyone to have that wonderful feeling of hearing native birds in your own backyard. If we are successful in staving off the extinction of these last birds, and finding tools that make it possible for those birds, that are now relegated high up in the mountains where there are no mosquitoes, to come back down into the lowlands, where people are, and reoccupy the Wao Kanaka, as they did a thousand years ago, then we have done something amazing. And I think that it's possible. It's that kind of hope that drives me in the conservation work that I do.