WHAT IS MANA?

Historically, European and American scholars described mana in Oceanic cultures as spiritual, supernatural, a magical force, a source of power and more. In Hawaiian traditions, the book states, “Mana was part of a vibrant system that intertwined many other foundations of Hawaiian culture and identity, and was evident in Native Hawaiians through ahia, and in their ali‘i, themselves, and their environment.”

However, English translations of mana fall short of expressing its meaning and significance from a Native Hawaiian perspective, which is more implicit in Hawaiian literature, genealogies and Hawaiian mele and mo‘olelo, notes Crabbe. “Mana is often felt, seen and experienced, rather than described in words; moreover there are ways to gain and lose mana through behavior. Here, mana is part of the spiritual world, but felt in the material world. In Western terms it might be described as power, or an essence of god or godliness. In some Polynesian languages the literal meaning of mana is ‘thunder, storm or wind.’”

Ancient Hawaiians believed mana could be inherited through lineage or acquired through gift, talent, skill, artistry, and gifts which are cultivated through education and training. But mana is more than a historical concept and remains part of each one of our genealogies today.

Inherited Mana

Ancient Hawaiians believed the gods were the primary source of mana, embodied in the familial and spiritual connection kūkūkāhina to the ‘āina and its resources. “Mo‘oku ‘āina [genealogies] allowed Hawaiians to trace the origins of their lineage and mana to the ancestral gods,” the book notes, citing Lili‘uokalani’s Ka Hae ‘āina. Genealogy helped locate the Hawaiian class hierarchy; the ali‘i, or ruling class, could trace their lineage more directly to the gods than maka‘āinana, who were further removed. Ali‘i, therefore, had more mana than the common people, and could enhance or acquire more mana by acting in ways that were considered pono and fulfilling their kuleana.

Acquired Mana

But mana isn’t only a privilege of birth; it can be acquired and actively cultivated through education and training. Expertise and keen intellect were highly admired, as was great skill. Experts in every field, great athletes, winning competitors and intellectual warriors were respected and known for having great mana. “Thus, it was a cultural imperative for Native Hawaiians to strive to be outstanding and to become highly ‘ike (knowledge, expert).” Traditional Native Hawaiian education reflected the high value of delf practice and honed intellect, but also reflected the importance of mana,” Crabbe wrote.

Mana in Places

In the Hawaiian worldview, mana is also connected to places and resources. “Some of these places are sacred, was ala‘a, the realm of the gods, was a place of mana; one rarely generated from wāna‘ū kūkā‘ina, the realm of the people, except by those in certain specialized positions. While mana in sacred places can also have mana for the acts and deeds performed there. Heiau, shrines, burial caves and graves have mana, for example, as do places mentioned in traditional oral literature. Places could also impart mana, such as at Kūkānīolā, a bathing stone site used by generations of ali‘i to ensure their children would be safeguarded with mana at birth.”

HOW DO WE ARTICULATE MANA?

“Mana Lāhui Kanaka dedicates a chapter to social science methods and research that can help identify and assess mana with relation to the body, mind and spirit. Another chapter offers descriptions of lived mana: “There comes a time when something happens that ignites the spirit and the hearts of the poi. You know, that comes from our ‘āina, that comes from the land. And it’s a voice that we all pick up collectively and we hear, and we work in the capacity that we’ve meant to work to address what is happening,” noted a member of the focus group discussions on mana.”

HOW DO WE ACCESS AND CULTIVATE MANA?

“Mana Lāhui Kanaka isn’t meant to be prescriptive, instead it includes a framework for ways mana can be used to raise our communities. ‘Programs/behaviors/communities etc. that want to consider mana should keep the following in mind. Mana could be considered as a disposition, a set of behaviors, beliefs, knowledge, experiences, or a combination of any of the aforementioned,’” notes Crabbe.

Mana Lāhui Kanaka is available at www.oha.org. In subsequent months, OHA will be reaching out to larger communities to discuss mana, in-person and online. Kūkū‘ō raises our cultural awareness and the Thirty Meter Telescope as examples of places where mana should be protected as sacred.