Mana

Mana - power possessed by man, but originating in the supernatural, and thus always imbued with a mystic quality.

It has often been defined as the existence of and the very aura of power. As authority, not the petty imposing of will on another, but an inherent quality of command and leadership. As a reservoir of strength. In modern terms, as personal magnetism or a high impact personality. As the charisma of a Roosevelt or Kennedy or Hitler or Castro. More figuratively, as a magnetic field or a mental spiritual battery.

primary source of mana was gods

In Hawaiian belief, mana could be emitted from a rock, the bones of the dead, the medicine that cures or the potion that kills. Mana, in man or object owed its primary origin to the gods. While personal magnetism in the Western sense is entirely a human attribute, Hawai'i's mana was a human quality tinged with the supernatural.

Closest to the gods and imbued with the highest mana were the ruling ali'i. Kings viewed mana as a genetic inheritance from god to king to king's descendant. Says historian David Malo, "It was firmly believed that the genius, power and inspiration [mana] of a king was like of a god."

brother - sister marriage not incest for ali'i

No ruler wanted this mana to be diluted. And so, ranking ali'i married ranking ali'i, ideally someone within the family. A king's marriage to his sister was not incest as the West knows it, but a positive way to insure that high mana was reinforced and passed down to heir and future ruler.

mana ingested by ritual cannibalism

Mana as a personal attribute such as courage, skill or wisdom, might be ingested by a kind of ritual cannibalism. For example, among the ali'i of long ago, a man's eye might be scooped out and eaten. In a magical, symbolic way, the ali'i who consumed the eye thereby absorbed the quality of the eye, the *'ike* (seeing, knowing). In *lua* (hand to hand) combat, a warrior might eat some part of his brave but defeated enemy, so that he might incorporate in himself some of the man's courage. Legend tells that Kamehameha's mother craved and ate the eye of a shark during her pregnancy, thereby taking in and giving to her infant, the daring and fierceness of the shark.

Some of one's mana lingered on in a man's name (inoa), in his bones (iwi), in the clothing that had been close to his body, in hair or nails or body excretions. But a man took his great "storehouse" of mana with him in death - unless he specifically passed it on to a descendant.

mana was general or specific power

In this "death bed" passing on of mana, Hawai'i made a distinction between two types of powers. One was the diffused, hard-to-define personal power and authority. The other was the specific talent or aptitude, such as the ability to heal, to prophesy, to dance the hula superbly, fish with marked success or build the finest canoes.

Passing on the general, diffused power was done by spoken declaration. As the Hawaiian felt death approaching, he called the 'ohana together. Usually after prayers, the dying person then "willed" his mana, much as money, property and family heirlooms are willed to heirs today. To the Hawaiian, the 'ōlelo (word; verbal statement) was both mystic force and binding contract.

mana of talent passed on by hā

Passing on the more specific mana of specialized talent was a quite different procedure. This was called *hā*. Mrs. Pūku'i describes the old and solemn ritual:

"A person about to die expelled his breath into his chosen successor's mouth. With this, the mana that made him an expert in an art or craft passed directly to one particular person, not to the family in general. The mana imparted by the hā kept the art alive."

The ritual could be varied. "The dying person could hā instead, right on the manawa (fontanel) of the head."

non-specific mana could be divided

Specific mana transmitted by hā went to one person only. However, a dying man either could pass on his general mana to one person, or he could divide it. Mrs. Pūku'i explains that "He could say, 'To you, Kimo, and to you, Nani, and you, Pua, I give equal parts of my mana."

An early legend indicates this parceling out of mana was once explained, if not practiced in terms of dividing the actual body. So goes the story of Hekili, the thunder god who took human form and lived on Maui.

"Everyone knew Hekili as a man who had mana, so that everything he said was fulfilled. He had but to speak to the thunder and lightning and they avenged him instantly upon his enemies...People believed him to be a man with mana of a god and they relied upon him as a man of mana and as a kahu (keeper or master) for the gods of the heavens... when they found that this kahu of great mana was dead, they took the body and divided it into small pieces and distributed the pieces to various parts around Maui. These became their (the people's) kuleana to worship the thunder god Kānehekili in human form.

Passing on mana, specific or general was not obligatory. A dying person could withhold his mana and take it with him back to the 'aumakua.

Tradition held that passed-on mana could be increased with prayers and appreciative use. Mana of many individuals could be built up as a kind of massed group strength and imparted to a sick or troubled one.

the "rule of mana"; misuse it and lose it

Conversely, mana, abused or misused, could be diminished or even lost. In fact, there was a way to hasten this loss. If an individual so abused his handed down power that everyone in his family was miserable, the family could pray and ask the deceased kupuna to take back his mana. If a chief used his mana to oppress his people, the people might eventually kill him. For mana that grew weak could be overcome by others' stronger mana.

This "misuse it and you lose it" axiom applied to any kind of mana, general or specific, good or wicked. The medical kahuna who prescribed carelessly and neglected the ritual prayers over his medicines would find eventually he could not heal. The sorcerer who failed to pray to his sorcerer gods, recited his spells in slipshod fashion, or killed indiscriminately would find his black art could no longer kill.

Source: Pūku'i, Haertig and Lee. Nānā I Ke Kumu vol 1. 1972.