Mana Revisited

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Linguistics, UH Mānoa
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Few linguistic terms in the history of anthropology have had greater currency than mana. While anthropological debate about this term has tended to center on the correct interpretation of the native concept, little attention has been given to the etymology of the word. When this is pursued, a novel perspective on this pivotal concept emerges. Cognates meaning ‘thunder’ and ‘wind’ suggest that Proto-Oceanic *mana did not refer to a spiritual or supernatural power that could be possessed by humans, but rather to powerful forces of nature such as thunder and storm winds that were conceived as the expression of an unseen supernatural agency. As Oceanic-speaking peoples spread eastward, the notion of supernatural agency became detached from the physical forces of nature that had inspired it, and assumed a life of its own, most notably in Polynesia. It is argued that the processes that gave rise to the canonical sense of mana, as this is commonly understood in the anthropology of religion, is part of a larger process in which widespread and apparently arbitrary features of human cultures were inspired by a prescientific attempt to understand the forces of nature.

Robert Blust received his B.A. in Anthropology from the University of Hawaii in 1967 and his PhD from the same institution in 1974. He then worked in Australia and Holland for ten years before returning to Hawaii in 1984. He is the author of The Austronesian Languages (2009), at 824-pages the first single-authored book ever done on the entire Austronesian language family, and over 200 other publications, as well as the 2,700-page online Austronesian Comparative dictionary, which is not quite half completed. He has published in both anthropology and archaeology journals, as well as in some 30 linguistics journals worldwide, on topics ranging from the reconstruction of kinship and social organization, to linguistic subgrouping, sound symbolism, lexical evidence for culture-history, theories of sound change, and the origin of dragons.

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