

MANA AS THE CONCEPT OF POWER¹ – by Anahera Herbert-Graves



Mana, our Māori concept of power, was grounded in Māori constitutional values and presumptions. Just as one could not be [tangata whenua](#) without any [whenua](#) to stand upon, [Iwi](#) and [Hapū](#) could only claim mana if they had the ability and capacity to effectively govern. To be “mana enhancing” was to keep the whenua and the people safe. In that way the concept of power was given effect.

However, that power and its exercise in everyday political affairs was always sanctioned by [tikanga](#) and by the fact that mana in relationship to a particular whenua ([mana whenua](#)) was always dependent upon the mana in the land itself – mana i te whenua.

Prior to 1840, the [common land mass](#) that made up the islands of [Te Ika a Maui](#) and [Te Waka a Maui](#) was occupied by distinct Iwi and Hapū polities. Each polity exercised its own mana and lived according to its tikanga secure in both its political independence and its [whakapapa](#)-based interdependence with others.

The effective governance on a day to day basis resided in the Hapū. That authority is encapsulated in the word “hapū” itself which means to be pregnant or swelling with life. So the Hapū was the place of power where the most life affirming (and life threatening) decisions were made.

Just as the [common land mass of Europe](#) was occupied by a number of different polities exercising their own sovereignty according to their law, so Iwi and Hapū were distinct and constitutionally regulated polities here.

Within this reality two fundamental prescriptions and proscriptions underpinned the effective exercise of mana. Firstly the power was bound by law and could only be exercised in ways consistent with tikanga and with the maintenance of whakapapa relationships and responsibilities. Secondly the power was held as a [taonga](#) handed down from the [tūpuna](#) to be exercised by the living for the benefit of the [mokopuna](#).

For these reasons it was a constitutional authority that could never be ceded or given away. Indeed no matter how much mana might vest in an Iwi or Hapū, and no matter how powerful individual [Rangatira](#) might presume to be, they never possessed the authority nor the right to subordinate the mana of the collective to some other entity. To do so would have been to give away the whakapapa and responsibilities bequeathed by the tūpuna.

The fact that there is no word for “cede” in [te reo](#) is not a linguistic shortcoming but an indication that to even contemplate giving away mana would have been legally impossible, culturally incomprehensible, and constitutionally untenable.

In that context, political power and tikanga were like the [maihi](#) and [amo](#) of a [whare tūpuna](#) – they held the “house” of the people together.

Next week we will further consider the political and constitutional role of tikanga.

¹ Edited extract from pp. 35 – 36 of He Whakaaro Here Whakaumu Mō Aotearoa – The Report of Matike Mai Aotearoa – The Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation.