INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION
J. Prytz Johansen: Kant Among the Maori

By Marshall Sahlins

The key to J. Prytz Johansen’s remarkable book is in the radical opening sentence of Chapter I: “If one could picture to oneself a person like Kant among the old Maoris—which indeed is difficult—one should not be surprised if to the fundamental categories of knowledge, time and space, he had added kinship” (1954: 9). Remaining just as radical at the same time as it becomes increasingly persuasive, the text goes on to demonstrate that the transpersonal notion of “fellowship” or “communal being” embodied in Maori kinship is indeed a fundamental category of their scheme of things. Not only are the Maori akin to the universe in its entirety—as JPJ says, they would be uncomfortable if they could not account for their kinship to the fish in the sea as well as to the guest in their home, preferably in detail—but as an active principle of intersubjective belonging, the same “fellowship” is the practical basis of mana and tapu, of the powers of chiefs, the values of gifts, the character of tribes, the nature of persons, the relations of time and space, the notions of cause, not to forget, in the present connection, the meaning of hau. Kinship, in short, underlies so much of what there is, for Maori. Given that JPJ is ever mindful of the contrasts to what we take for reality, particularly to what we make of individuality, it does not exaggerate to say that what he has produced is a brilliant work of comparative ontology—the highest form of anthropology.

As JPJ observed in the Introduction to a contemplated second edition of The Maori and his religion—what would have been the politically-corrected title?—the idea of kinship as a “fellowship” is much like Levy-Bruhl’s “participation” (see below). Leaving aside the baggage of a “pre-logical mentality” (which Levy-Bruhl also discarded), JPJ spoke similarly of kinship as the intrinsic membership of the one in the other: “You were born in me . . . . Yes, that is true, I was born in you” (30). Joined by an “inner solidarity of souls,” kinfolk then live each other’s lives, symbolically and emotionally, and die each other’s deaths. Joy and misfortune, honor and shame: the significant things that happen to one, even at a distance, are felt by the others. (“Te Rangiheata was a very competent man in that kind of matter . . . misfortunes of relatives were not concealed to him” [28].) In JPJ’s treatment, this fellowship has collective as well as interpersonal dimensions: the union of the one and the many as well as the self and the other. Named as “Descendants of So-and-so” (Ngati X, Ngai Y), the members of Maori tribal groups, hapu especially, are not only
identified with their ancestors but are endowed with the latter’s distinctive qualities, including their idiosyncrasies of behavior, appearance, or the like. (Comparative ontology: the individual as differentia of the class [see Schrempp 1992: 94].) Indeed the major motif of the book is JPJ’s exposition in many structural registers of the Maori “kinship I”: the ubiquitous use of “I,” the first person pronoun, by current tribal members to refer to the group as a whole, to narrate its collective history, and to recount the feats of heroic ancestors as their own doings. Here is the Maori’s “fundamental experience of extending beyond the body, of having an ‘I’ the boundaries of which are so far flung that they may embrace a whole tribe, with its country and universe (244).”

At the risk of piling commentary on commentary—what else is anthropology but Talmudic exegesis by non-believers?—I briefly speak to JPJ’s exposition of the generative role of the “kinship I” in Maori notions of temporality and mana.

In the measure that, by the fellowship of the “kinship I,” the ancestors and the living have one and the same existence, then the past is present and the present, past. As historical events are attributed to contemporary persons and contemporary events to historical persons, time is collapsed by movements in both directions. On the one hand, I live what the ancestors did and suffered before I was born:

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\text{It is this kinship I which reveals itself in the rich traditions of the Maori: the history of the kinship group is his own. It is the kinship I which remembers old insults and old friendship, which sticks to its country and fights for it and which observes the customs of the ancestors, everything because it is the same unbroken I, which lives in all of it (30).}
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On the other hand, if what the ancestors did is what I now do, what I do now is what the ancestors did. Taking revenge, one becomes an instance of Whakatau, the great avenger of Maori tradition. “Whenever vengeance is wreaked on somebody again, Whakatau again does his deed in the shape of the avenger (148).” Likewise, one dies the death of the primordial culture hero Maui who famously brought mortality to mankind. Or again, as a passage from the dark (po) of the womb to the light (ao) of the living, the birth of a son repeats the primordial separation of the Sky Father (Rangi) and Earth Mother (Papa) by the god Tane that made an earthly human existence possible. “You were born to the world of light,” a father now chants to his infant son, when “Tane put the poles of heaven above us (161).” In the kind of bold move that distinguishes the text throughout, JPJ argues that what is at issue is not mere simile, not just that the present is “like” the past, as we are inclined to think. “We find it quite obvious that when an event happens, it never returns; but this is exactly what happens (ibid.).”

Even more radical is JPJ’s illuminating argument that mana is an “active fellowship.” I think this definitely solves the venerable mana problem. Mana,
as he says, “expresses something participated, an active fellowship which according to its nature is never inextricably bound with any single thing or any human being (85).” The same transpersonal being that we saw inscribed in the “kinship I” is here represented in an objectified and transactable form: that is to say, in existences of greater or lesser measure, or the same or different quality, that can be imposed on one another for better or for worse. In other words, mana is being-power. Kinsmen are said to manaaki each other, meaning that they reciprocally honor each other in their conduct, which is indeed fellowship in practice inasmuch as to manaaki is “to give out of one’s own life (82).” (The hau of the gift is not simply the why of the gift because it is the life of the gift.) Hence the superior mana of the chief, as the direct heir and incarnation of ancestral being. The chief’s life permeates and enhances the existence of his people: it was said of Kupe, great chief from the original homeland of Hawai ki, that “his mana penetrated into the population of the islands (90-91).” The greater the concentration of the chief’s mana, the further it extends itself, thus encompassing others in his own great life by his active presence in theirs.

The intersubjectivity of kinship is the connectivity by which mana as being-power is actively transmitted—with effects from which no one or no thing need be excluded, given the universality of Maori kinship. As the effectiveness of relationality or fellowship, neither need the transmission of mana require any overt act or actual contact. Mana may function by something like contagion, or in the negative case, pollution. If a whole group can lose mana and status because of the shame of one of its members—“Will not his shame be their shame? Is there anything which can prevent shame from leaping from mind to mind and devouring honour and vitality in all?” (81)—it is because the greater being has been penetrated and corrupted by the lesser. Since men are relatively tapu and women noa, this explains a lot about gender practices. Then again, as objectified being, mana can be ritually manipulated to coercively impose one’s own being on others to their detriment: as, for instance, in warfare where “prior to the open fight there is a hidden one in which the important thing is to possess oneself of the enemy’s mana—to force one’s own life into them in order during the fight to be able to defeat them also from within (258).”

Where mana is thus effected contagiously and relationally, tapu must be just around the corner—as also tupu (roughly, ‘growth, increase’), aitia (roughly, ‘misfortune’), wairua (roughly, ‘soul’), among other kindred notions. As JPJ so brilliantly explained, all are in their practice sequitur to the “fellowship” which is the essence of Maori kinship. Maybe the new title should be Prolegomena to any future metaphysics of kinship.