

# MĀ‘AWE PONO

## A HAWAIIAN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By Kū Kahakalau, Ph.D.

PART 2:

### Distinguishing Qualities

As a distinctive twenty-first-century Indigenous research method, *Mā‘awe Pono* incorporates a number of special qualities not necessarily unique or exclusively Indigenous, but that collectively distinguish *Mā‘awe Pono* from other methodologies. These qualities include the relations and roles of the various participants in the research process, the purpose of the research, the methods employed, and the impact made.

One distinguishing quality of *Mā‘awe Pono* is the intense involvement of the primary researcher in the research process, a feature shared with many other Indigenous methodologies. This involvement begins with the question, or the phenomenon, to be researched, which has to matter personally to the primary researcher. Data suggests that when the question is aligned with the researcher’s personal *‘i‘ini*, or desire, there is generally a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with the question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated, or answered, regardless of the time involved. *Mā‘awe Pono* asserts that as the researcher allows passion, compassion, and comprehension to mingle, the unity of intellect, emotion, and spirit, known as *lōkahi*, becomes transparent.

The intimate personal involvement of the researcher is in contrast to colonial, academic models, which support a separation between the researcher and the research project. These positivist research methodologies purport a “rigorous scientific methodology applied by a rational, neutral, and objective subject to the study of an object clearly positioned outside of himself” (Strega 2015, 122). This means that the researcher is expected to remain neutral and unbiased, removing his/her personal opinion from the research process. For Hawaiians, this notion of neutrality is incomprehensible, because Hawaiians believe that we bring our *mana*, or personal power, to every situation and every task. This includes all our strengths: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. It also includes our knowledge, skills, and experiences, our hopes, dreams, and visions, as well as our ancestral endowments, like our *mo‘okū‘auhau*, or genealogy, and the wisdom shared by our ancestors while we sleep. These cumulative experiences influence what we do as children, grandchildren, siblings, spouses, parents, grandparents, and friends. They also influence our behavior as researchers. In fact, it is this personal *mana*, or spiritual power, contributed by the researchers to the research process, that gives *Mā‘awe Pono* the power to be a change agent, a beacon of hope for Indigenous communities to solve our own problems.

*Mā‘awe Pono* believes that the best way to gain expertise in any subject is to become intricately involved in the phenomenon. This participatory role of the researcher is grounded in the proverb, “*Nānā ka maka, hana ka lima*. Observe with the eyes; work with the hands. Just watching isn’t enough. Pitch in and help” (Pukui 1983, 247). This ancient statement validates that just observing from afar is of little value. Moreover, once the eyes observe, there is a responsibility to act by imitating what was observed or by using the information gained through observation to achieve the goal. *Mā‘awe Pono* suggests that as the primary researcher personally encounters and interacts with the phenomenon, remaining open, receptive, and attuned to all facets of the experience, knowledge is discovered. This knowledge gradually continues to grow as a result of the researcher’s direct experiences throughout the research process, explicated through multiple processes, senses, and sources. Since the primary researcher is expected to become an expert on the research topic, it is essential that all who use *Mā‘awe Pono* as a research methodology come with a solid background in things Hawaiian, including our language, cultural values, and practices. Such

researchers must also know Hawaiian protocol, history, and prominent issues facing modern Hawaiians and our archipelago.

Another distinguishing aspect of *Mā'awe Pono* concerns the concept of time. *Mā'awe Pono* aligns with existing heuristic practices, which require the researcher to take the time to allow things to evolve, and revelations to formulate. In fact, one of the eight phases of *Mā'awe Pono* specifically allots time for indwelling and reflection, requiring the primary researcher to become receptive and to listen to her *na'au* (gut), regardless of how long this process will take. This inherent *mana* of patience, well known by our elders, is expressed in the saying, “*E ho'omanawanui*. Be patient” (Pukui and Elbert 1983, 238). This popular saying reminds researchers to take time to reflect and allow ancestral *'ike* (knowledge) and recent insight to interact and surface as new knowledge. Furthermore, rather than operating according to a calendar that focuses on the completion of deadlines, *Mā'awe Pono* advocates for an organic accomplishment of the task at hand, regardless of the length of time involved. Finally, contrary to heuristic methods, which are designed to study past and present phenomena, *Mā'awe Pono* is timeless in that it can also be used to explore phenomena, which are currently evolving, as well as those still to be born in the future.

As a participatory method of research, *Mā'awe Pono* requires the active involvement of a specific group or community concerned with the issue at hand, who become essential co-researchers in the process. In fact, rather than postulating the primary researcher as an authority figure who collects, interprets, and presents the findings, *Mā'awe Pono* situates various groups of co-researchers as joint contributors and investigators. By leveraging insider knowledge, collaborators assure that the research actually addresses their needs and that solutions are found. This process also validates the experiences of the participants, assists in the development of critical skills, and elevates community members to expert status. Moreover, by becoming collaborators, rather than merely subjects, the co-researchers play a crucial role, not just in the gathering, but more importantly in the interpretation, of the data.

In order to assure a successful collaboration it is essential that the primary researcher has cultivated strong personal relationships with the community, and the various research participants. This is essential, because, contrary to most Western research projects, where the researcher and participants have a time-limited relationship that expires when the project is complete, Indigenous research in and for native communities builds on long-term, familial relations between the researcher and the participants. Data shows that personal relations with the primary researcher motivate co-researchers to stay with the project and finish what was started. Moreover, engaging collectively in a worthwhile project has shown to result not only in internal satisfaction, but also in collective efficacy.

As a Hawaiian methodology, *Mā'awe Pono* advocates and uses methods of data collection, analysis, and presentation that are culturally congruent. These culturally based methods align with Hawaiian values and have been used by our ancestors for thousands of years. They are valid simply because they have withstood the test of time. Interestingly, most of these Hawaiian methods align with methods of data collection, analysis, and presentation used by Indigenous scholars elsewhere.

One important method used by *Mā'awe Pono* to gather data involves observation, substantiated by the proverb, “*I ka nānā nō a 'ike*. By observing one learns” (Pukui 1983, 129). This proverb clearly validates observation as a successful Hawaiian method of collecting data used by our ancestors. “*Nei ka honua, he 'ōla'i ia*. When the earth trembles, it is an earthquake. We know what it is by what it does” (Pukui 1983, 251). This is another proverb that legitimizes observation. In fact, the use of observation as a research method dates back thousands of years, when our ancestors in central Polynesia used their observations of the patterns of migratory birds, and other phenomena, to hypothesize that there were islands to the north. This theory prompted them to set out on a journey over thousands of miles of open ocean until they discovered the Hawaiian archipelago about two thousand years ago.

The concept of intense, keen observation of a phenomenon or problem, often over long periods of time, and by multiple experts, is an essential component of *Mā'awe Pono*. One of our most well-known

Hawaiian proverbs states, “*Nānā ka maka, ho‘olohe ka pepeiao, pa‘a ka waha*. Observe with the eyes; listen with the ears; shut the mouth. Thus one learns” (Pukui 1983, 248). Our ancestors even created a proverb to describe a careful observer, calling him, “*Ka manu ka‘upu hālō ‘ale o ka moana*. The *ka‘upu*, the bird that observes the ocean” (Pukui 1983, 160). This propensity of being keen observers of our surroundings is a trademark recognized easily among Hawaiians even today. In fact, this predisposition to continuously observe one’s environment provided our *kūpuna* a solid knowledge of their place, as is reflected in the following proverb, “*‘Ōlelo ke kupa o ka ‘āina ua mālie, ua au koa‘e*. The natives of the land declare the weather is calm when the tropic bird travels afar” (Pukui, 1983, 273). This proverb substantiates the reliability of data gained by observation and confirms that the findings of those intricately involved in the research are valid, especially when patterns clearly replicate themselves.

Another culturally congruent aspect of *Mā‘awe Pono* is the fact that the primary researcher and the various teams of co-researchers know, adhere to, and practice Hawaiian protocol at all times. Hawaiian protocol can be defined as doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason. From a Hawaiian perspective then, practicing Hawaiian protocol is part of our effort to create and maintain a state of *pono*, or righteousness. Practicing Hawaiian protocol in research is necessary to assure that the interactions between people, the environment, and the spiritual world are *pono* (appropriate) at all times. This means that before starting any task relating to the research, the researcher(s) must connect with the spiritual world. It also means that we continuously acknowledge our ancestors and the role of spiritual guides in the research process and ask for their blessings and support as we complete the various phases of the research.

Practicing Hawaiian protocol also implies that we follow Hawaiian rules of engagement when interacting with others, including asking permission to enter someone’s house, removing our footwear when entering, bringing gifts, *honi* (kissing) the people involved in the research, and assuring that the heads of younger persons remain below the head of older people at all times. These rules also mandate that the researchers conduct appropriate entry and exit protocol when interacting with the natural world and that there is no damage to people or the environment as a direct, or indirect, result of the research.

*Mā‘awe Pono* also involves finding informants who have a strong background in the issue to be solved. Seeking the input of those close to a situation or problem is a well-known Hawaiian practice, described in the following proverb: “*‘O ka uhiwai nō kā i ‘ike i ka ‘ino o ka wai*. Only the mist knows the storm that caused the streams to swell—only those who are close to a person/situation know the problem(s)” (Pukui 1983, 266). However, rather than using formal structured interviews to gather data from these sources of knowledge, *Mā‘awe Pono* relies primarily on more informal, conversational methods, what Hawaiians call “talk story.” This generally involves informants and co-researchers sitting together and informally discussing the research question, or aspects of the research question, in a safe, familial environment. It is this atmosphere of *aloha*, or love and compassion, that allows the researchers as well as the informants to share their knowledge and expertise in an open, non-threatening way.

In cases where there are large groups of co-researchers or informants, and/or where there is a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the co-researcher(s) and/or informant(s), *Mā‘awe Pono* advocates the integration of technology as a non-confrontational method, which cleverly addresses the issue of “face.” This issue is an important factor within Indigenous communities, since there is generally a tendency to avoid conflict, especially with elders and cultural or academic experts. As a result, rather than telling how they really feel, Indigenous co-researchers and informants tend to keep both their praise and their criticism at a minimum, since it is considered impolite and embarrassing to praise or to criticize others. One way to eliminate this issue of “face” is by using email interviews, which are generally viewed as indirect responses to a computer question, rather than a direct response to a specific, known researcher. Research over the past three decades shows that these e-interviews work especially well soliciting honest opinions from native high school and college students, who are generally very comfortable with technology. Other uses of technology, which make *Mā‘awe Pono* cutting edge, include the use of tools

like SurveyMonkey and Facebook to gather data, and Zoom video conferencing to hold focus group discussions.

One traditional Hawaiian way of problem solving has always included experimenting or testing the phenomenon at hand. This could be as simple as throwing a ti leaf into a pool of water to test if a *mo'ō* (dragon) or other supernatural creature is lurking in the water. If the ti leaf floats the water is safe for swimming. If it sinks, the deity is home and the water is not safe. Our medical *kahuna* (experts) also used experimentation and tests for diagnosis and prognosis. In fact, when unsure of a procedure or practice, a proverb suggests, “*E ho'ā'o nō i pau kuhihewa*. Try it and rid yourself of illusion” (Pukui 1983, 35). In other words, try the matter out and the guessing, whether it works or not, is over. This type of experimentation, generally known as action research, is also aligned with the proverb, “*Ma ka hana ka 'ike*. By doing one learns,” which purports that Hawaiians establish facts and principles from experience and deduce theory from practice (Pukui 1983, 227).

Action research is by design collaborative, emphasizing community participation, requiring participants to have some level of investment in the study, and share a desire to bring about meaningful social change at a local level. In fact, “the values embedded in the action research process are expressed in a discourse of ‘sensitivity,’ ‘respect,’ ‘self empowerment,’ ‘professionalism,’ ‘collaboration’ and shared responsibility’ (Somekh 2006, 47). *Mā'awe Pono* has purposefully been designed to be action-oriented, and make a difference in Hawaiian communities. Centuries of practice confirm that collective commitment, fortitude, and courage allow us to tackle even gargantuan problems and achieve success beyond our wildest dreams. This process of pooling our strengths with others to find solutions to the issues facing our land and our people is called *kūkulu kumuhanā* in Hawaiian. *Mā'awe Pono* relies heavily on this concept of collaboration, articulated in multiple Hawaiian proverbs, including the following call to come together to tackle a given task: “*E ala! E alu! E kuilima!* Up! Together! Join hands!” and “*Pūpūkahi i holomua*. Unite in order to progress” (Pukui 1983, 32). By incorporating collective inquiry and experimentation *Mā'awe Pono* wants to assure that native communities are active participants in charting their future.

Indeed, *Mā'awe Pono* carries with it a clear directive to initiate social impact and bring about visible, measurable progress toward a goal. This aim is supported by the Hawaiian proverb, “*He 'ike 'ana 'ia i ka pono*. It is recognizing the right thing. One has seen the right thing to do and has done it” (Pukui 1983, 98). Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that research that involves Native people, as individuals or as communities, should set out to make a positive difference for the one researched (Smith 1999, 131). *Mā'awe Pono* is dedicated to the betterment of Hawaiian people and our environment by solving problems either specific to a Hawaiian community, or something affecting most, or even all, Hawaiians. Interestingly, most phenomena that matter to Hawaiians, often also have larger social, and perhaps universal, significance. Therefore, although the context presented in this chapter is clearly localized, there is infinite potential for much larger, even global impact, in line with the motto: think globally, act locally. So while *Mā'awe Pono* is clearly a *kanaka* (Hawaiian) methodology, the concepts presented can also be useful, not just for other Indigenous peoples, but for a non-Indigenous, global audience.