



'I Will Not Leave My Baby Behind': A Cook Island Māori Family's Experience of New Zealand Māori Traditional Healing

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Traditional healers in many parts of the world have used family focused understandings and interventions well before the emergence of western family therapy theory and practice. This paper gives a detailed account of New Zealand Māori traditional healing work with a Cook Island Māori family in which the eldest daughter was in considerable distress as were her family, who believed that she had become maki tūpāpaku (possessed). This account is told from the perspectives of the child psychiatrist, the traditional healer and the mother of the family. While the intervention bears a superficial resemblance to western family therapy approaches, the theoretical foundation reflects the traditional healer's New Zealand Māori world views in which spiritual understandings are paramount, and concepts of mana, tapu and mauri¹ guide him in the family healing process. The single session described here can be viewed as an indigenous family therapy intervention involving six generations of family members, both living and deceased, in the one room. Conclusions: Indigenous communities have called for traditional healers to be employed alongside child mental health workers and family therapists who work with their communities. Close and sincere collaboration between an indigenous traditional healer and a health professional can offer a family in distress healing possibilities that may not be available to them in conventional child mental health or other family therapy settings.

Keywords: Cook Island Māori, family therapy, indigenous, New Zealand Māori, traditional healing

Key Points

- 1 Cook Island Māori and New Zealand Māori traditional healers have used family focused understandings and interventions for generations and these practices were severely curtailed due to European colonisation.
- 2 Concepts such as tapu and mana are intrinsic to the work of Cook Island Māori and New Zealand Māori traditional healers and may guide many aspects of assessment and intervention.
- 3 It is commonly accepted in Cook Island Māori and New Zealand Māori communities that their traditional healers may perceive communications from deceased ancestors and could use this information to guide assessment and intervention practices.
- 4 Indigenous communities have called for traditional healers to be employed alongside other therapists in services working with their communities.
- 5 Close and sincere collaboration between indigenous traditional healers, other family therapists and health practitioners can offer indigenous families in distress greater healing possibilities.

There are very few accounts of the work of indigenous traditional healers in the family therapy literature (Hajal, 1987), yet indigenous practitioners from different parts of the world often focus on family relationships in their therapeutic practice. New

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In the following article, all names of family members have been changed to protect the identity of the family.

Zealand Māori traditional healers commonly view unresolved intergenerational issues in families as a cause for psychological, spiritual or interpersonal distress in people who seek their assistance (Durie, 2009; Mark & Lyons, 2010).

This article describes the story of a ten year old Cook Island Māori girl named Moana, told from three different perspectives. It begins with an outline of the family predicament and background context and then a description of the session with the family. This is narrated by Allister Bush, the child psychiatrist involved in delivering this collaborative approach to family therapy which was guided by traditional indigenous New Zealand Māori understandings of aetiology and treatment. The following section is told from the perspective of the New Zealand Māori traditional healer, Wiremu NiaNia, who led and directed the cultural therapeutic intervention with Allister's support. The final voice is that of Tere, the mother of Moana. Each narration brings a different perspective and together they illuminate a multi-dimensional family therapy process which extends beyond immediate and living family members and is cognisant of genealogical and intergenerational influences.

Allister's Perspective

The family situation

Tere rang to refer her daughter Moana to our Pasifika child mental health service with an uncommon but intriguing request. She said that she would like our urgent help with her daughter but insisted on a cultural focus rather than a purely mental health assessment. Given that she was convinced that her daughter's difficulties were related to a cultural problem, she wondered if we might provide this. Everyone in the family was becoming very distressed about Moana's strange and disturbed behaviour which only occurred at night.

We urgently met with Moana and her mother, her nine year old sister Melanie and four year old brother. Tere explained that 8 weeks prior to our meeting she and her new husband William had returned from their honeymoon in the Cook Islands, during which time the three children had stayed at home with Tere's mother, their grandmother. This had been Tere's first visit back to her ancestral home in the Cook Islands since leaving there and immigrating to Aotearoa/New Zealand at the age of 12. Two weeks after their return, Moana began to wake up before midnight agitated, angry and then strangely distant and withdrawn. Sometimes her agitated behaviour went on for several hours during the night and was very frightening for the family. At times Moana would become so enraged, she would lash out at her mother and stepfather and had surprising strength for her age and size when they tried to restrain her. Tere and her husband talked about a 'disturbing look' that indicated to them that she had 'a total personality change'. While she could previously be strong willed, she was usually respectful and helpful and took her responsibilities as the eldest sibling seriously.

During several of these episodes Moana had spoken in the ancestral dialect of her mother's family, using vocabulary and ancestral names for particular family members that her mother believed she couldn't possibly know. One night Tere's mother encouraged Tere to talk to an agitated Moana in their ancestral dialect. Accordingly, Tere asked her: 'Who are you? What do you want?' Moana spat at her mother and then responded angrily: 'Kāre au e akaruke i tāku pepē, kā tākinokino ia e kōtou!' (I will not leave my baby behind because you people will hurt her).

At other times Moana said she could see shadows and faces in the corner of her bedroom and one night she told of seeing an old lady with long grey hair and a walking stick in the same corner. Moana's anxiety, sleep disturbance and episodes of agitated behaviour continued in the weeks leading up to our first meeting and her mother and stepfather became increasingly exhausted.

Suspecting a spiritual problem, Tere sought assistance from their church pastor who had a Pacific background. He blessed Moana, her family and their house. For a few days there was an improvement in Moana's disturbed nocturnal behaviour but it then worsened again. Tere consulted local New Zealand Māori elders (kaumātua) who arrived the same night as the pastor and encouraged her to continue with the pastor. Tere also consulted her mother and other senior family members who supported her view that this was a cultural problem known as *maki tūpāpaku*.² But no matter what, Moana's nocturnal distress and agitation were unrelenting. Tere was reluctant to seek help from a mental health service as she feared that her daughter's problem could be misdiagnosed as a mental health disorder. However, eventually her desperation reached such a point that she decided to do so.

Our child mental health service was set up to address the mental health needs of Pacific children, young people and their families in our local area in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Bush, Chapman, Drummond & Fagaloa, 2009). Local referrers are generally aware that we put a strong emphasis on Pasifika cultural values in our interactions with families. Most of our staff are of Pacific descent and we have a Samoan cultural consultant, Fa'amausili Chapman, who is a matai (titled elder) and is available to join us in our meetings with families.

Background family context

Matters had been difficult for some time between Tere and John, her ex-husband and Moana's father. Their separation in Moana's preschool years became increasingly acrimonious due to their legal battle over custody of Moana and her sister. Tere spoke wistfully about the warm and mutually affectionate relationship that she had always enjoyed with Moana. She willingly acknowledged that it had been a stressful time leading up to her recent wedding and wondered if she had been so distracted that she had lost touch with Moana.

From my psychiatric viewpoint, there was no suggestion of previous physical or sexual trauma, although Moana had witnessed conflict between her parents in her preschool years. Her mother saw Moana's first year of life as difficult but did not recall being depressed. There was no psychosis reported in the family. Moana had no previous epilepsy or other medical problems and did not seem depressed. She was however anxious about things in general and most worried at night, but at a loss to explain the source of her worry. Other than the faces and shadows she saw, Moana had no other symptoms suggesting psychosis. She had no recall of the nocturnal events that Tere and her husband were reporting. When I met with John, he didn't report similar episodes when Moana stayed with him. However, of late these visits had been infrequent due to Tere's concerns about Moana.

At this point in the first meetings with the family, I was puzzled about Moana's experiences and symptoms. They didn't fit into a recognised diagnostic category. Some elements resembled a psychotic process, or possibly a dissociative process as a result of trauma. However, the most obvious stress Moana was under was the ongoing acrimony and lack of communication between her mother and father. This could

easily have been exacerbated during the preparations for Tere's wedding and seemed the most likely systemic explanation for her distress. Still this did not account for Tere's description of Moana's utterances in her ancestral dialect in the most conflicted moments, which I found intriguing.

Due to my contact with colleagues from The Family Centre, Lower Hutt (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003) and my work in Māori and Pacific indigenous services, Tere's description reminded me of accounts of rare instances of people who had been thought by family members to be 'possessed'. I was struck by Tere's conviction that Moana was suffering from a cultural problem and her labelling this problem as 'possession'. I wanted to understand how Tere had come to this conclusion in order to work with her to unravel this puzzle and hopefully find some relief for Moana and the family.

Tere's early experiences

Tere was born in Aotearoa/New Zealand but in her infancy returned to her ancestral home in the Cook Islands.³ From her infancy until she was 8 years old, Tere was cared for primarily by her Nana (grandmother) as well as her Vouvou (great great grandmother), who was by then in her 90's and was the ta'unga (Cook Island traditional healer) of the local community. She had been sent to live with her great great grandmother because she was the eldest child in her generation, just as her mother and grandmother had been before her. During these formative years Tere was almost always in the presence of this elderly matriarch. She conversed with Tere in their ancestral tongue and instructed her about traditional understandings regarding the ancestors and their relationships to spirituality. She gave priority to her Christianity by insisting that 'God is more powerful than spirits' and is 'the best source of strength' when faced with spiritual problems.

Tere's great great grandmother died when Tere was eight after a fortnight in which she was bedridden. Two nights before she died she appeared, to everyone's astonishment, at two in the morning, dressed and outside her house with a bundle of clothes. She was addressing a number of deceased ancestors: *Te tiaki nei au i tāku pepē, ko māua kā ano atu ei* (I'm waiting for my baby girl, we're coming together). The 'girl' she was referring to was assumed to be Tere. She then announced to the adults present: *'Kāre au e akaruke i tāku pepē, kā tākinokino ia e kōtou!*' (I will not leave my baby behind because you people will hurt her).

Several years after her great great grandmother's death, Tere went to live with her mother in Aotearoa/New Zealand. However she returned to the Cook Islands, although not to her ancestral home, in her late teens, with her parents who were immersed in considerable conflict with each other. One night Tere awoke in the early hours agitated and angry, although she had very little recollection of that the next day. Her family reported it took five able-bodied adults to restrain her and she was shouting: *'Kāre au e akaruke i tāku pepē, kā tākinokino ia e kōtou!*' (I will not leave my baby behind because you people will hurt her). The adults present had no doubt these words not only sounded like her great great grandmother but in fact, were her speaking through Tere. Immediately after, Tere called out to her mother, this time in English: 'Mum, please don't let me go!' Tere recalled one further episode similar to this in her early 20's, during a time when she was distressed about her relationship with John.

After hearing Tere's life story, I was convinced that there was more to this than a psychiatric perspective could hope to unravel. We all agreed that we needed cultural

expertise to help us make sense of this and seek an appropriate resolution, ideally a traditional healer from their Cook Island culture and community. However the family had already exhausted their own contacts. At our service, at that time we did not know of any Cook Island Māori traditional healers in our local community. In the absence of such contacts I tentatively suggested a consultation with my colleague Wiremu NiaNia. I explained that I had worked closely with Wiremu over a 5 year period and trusted his judgement on such matters. I said that he had frequently been able to help families with spiritual problems, often in surprising ways. I raised with them a major doubt that I had, which was that they were from a Cook Island Māori background, whereas Wiremu is Māori (indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand). Tere said she was comfortable to consult a practitioner from a New Zealand Māori background due to the close genealogical connections between their cultures. Tere and her husband and Moana's father, John, immediately accepted my proposal of a consultation with Wiremu.

Family healing intervention

I could feel the tension in the room as we began our meeting with the family. Tere was seated next to her husband, William, with Moana on her other side. On the opposite side of the room Moana's father John sat next to Moana's sister, Melanie. I noticed that Wiremu had placed himself right next to John, and after a brief moment made a light-hearted comment and reached out and placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. I could see that John relaxed a little after that.

Our Pacific cultural consultant Fa'amausili, mindful of the Christian affiliations of many Pacific families, sought the family's permission to begin the session with a prayer. When they readily agreed, he offered a prayer and then welcomed everyone and suggested that we have a round of introductions. Wiremu was the last to introduce himself and described his role as a cultural therapist. He said that although he did not consider himself to be an expert, especially on Cook Island Māori cultural matters, he hoped he would be able to offer something helpful for the family. He then asked if I would say a few words about the family's concerns so that he could understand more about their situation. I thanked everyone for coming and acknowledged that it was a sign of Tere and John's commitment to Moana that they both chose to attend, despite their differences. Then I summarised their concerns about Moana, the times when she would be angry, upset, unable to sleep and yet she couldn't remember anything about it the next day. I spoke of Tere's concern that there could be a cultural or spiritual problem behind these matters and mentioned that we were meeting Wiremu in the hope that he might be able to help us all understand this better and perhaps resolve the matter.

Immediately prior to the meeting I had briefed Wiremu, explaining who was in the family, and that Tere was wondering if Moana was suffering from some kind of 'possession'. I told him that Tere and Moana's birth father had separated some years before and that things might be tense between them, taking into account that her new husband was there as well. In spite of this they had agreed to meet together on behalf of Moana. This was the only information that Wiremu had when he first stepped into the room.

After Wiremu exchanged some light hearted words with Moana and Melanie, and their brother exited the room seeking toys from the waiting area, Wiremu requested an opportunity to speak with the adults on their own. I helped the girls find some toys and they skilfully entertained their younger brother in an adjacent room next to the reception area.

Wiremu then began to address Moana's father John, Tere, and her husband, William. He spoke about a feeling of anxiety that he had picked up in his chest area. He said that he had sensed whom he was supposed to be meeting immediately upon setting foot into the room. To make his point, he gestured to where Moana had been sitting. He said that he believed that the anxiety he was picking up was from Moana. At this point Tere, whom I had noticed looking very tense and uncertain, asked Wiremu, 'Did you pick up anything around Moana?' Wiremu responded: 'There is a presence here which looked at me and then withdrew'. Looking intently at Wiremu, Tere then asked him: 'Can you tell what gender?' Instead of a direct reply to her inquiry, Wiremu met her searching gaze and responded carefully, 'Let me answer that by asking you: how did you get on with your grandmother?'

This response both shocked and reassured her. It was at this point that there was a marked change in Tere's demeanour. Her shoulders relaxed and she began to talk to Wiremu about her concerns about Moana and the difficulties over the previous weeks. I sensed that she had accepted something implicit in Wiremu's query and that this had reassured her that she could trust him. Tere started to speak without any restraint about her conviction that there was something cultural that was interfering with Moana's wellbeing. She wondered if it might be some local spiritual matter. Perhaps Moana had accidentally breached a New Zealand Māori tapu (something sacred or forbidden) in the area in Aotearoa/New Zealand where they lived. Or could it have arisen from her recent visit to her ancestral home in the Cook Islands? Tere explained that she had her own experiences of 'cultural issues' from her earlier years. Then she raised a question about demonic possession.

Wiremu responded to this question by saying: 'Sometimes we are influenced by our Christian beliefs to think that there is a demonic presence or a demonic possession, and that most things that are unexplainable are demonic. However from the point of view of our Tūpuna (ancestors), there are many other explanations. Sometimes the ancestors use these ways to send a message to the living. The message may be to sound the alarm or alert us to a problem. It may be a wake-up call from the other side'. Wiremu explained that he had a strong feeling that the old lady he could see was giving the family a message that if the girl wasn't looked after then she would come and take her. He explained that from a New Zealand Māori point of view; 'the actions of the generation before and the generation before that come down upon the younger generation' and so often, answers can be found in the whakapapa (genealogy), in problems that occurred between people or breaches of tapu (something sacred or forbidden) in previous generations. Wiremu began asking more about the family on both Moana's parents' sides. He continued to converse with Tere and at the same time when he referred either directly or indirectly to John in the conversation he would rest a supportive hand on John's shoulder. John remained silent but when Wiremu directed a question to him, he spoke of Moana's recent anxiety and difficulties sleeping.

Soon after this Wiremu began to address his concern about the rift between Tere and John. The following transcript illustrates how Wiremu approached this matter. As we join the conversation, Tere is speaking about her intuitive awareness about when things aren't going well for Moana, even if she is away from Tere's presence.

Tere: I don't know if it's a gift or something that has been passed on. I'm probably still trying to find answers, especially when they are away with him... I'm having either

anxiety or chest pains or something like that. But as I'm getting older I'm acknowledging...Is it a gift or is it a mother's connection to their children? I don't know.

Wiremu (speaking softly, gently but firmly): There will always be a mother's connection to their children. Tere, I'm just making an observation here. You know how we were talking about bringing closure so that unresolved issues from past generations don't get passed onto the children. I notice that you refer to John as 'him' a lot. Part of the closure is saying 'John'. That's starting the healing. You take that first step, something spiritually will happen. Because, I've been noticing right throughout the whole meeting, its 'him' or 'he' or 'his' when you are talking about John. Sorry for making that observation.

Tere: No that's.... Yeah.....

Wiremu: I'm just pointing that out. Because I'm talking about bringing about a closure, bringing about something that's good for the kids. So the first thing is, this gentleman over here has a name. (Indicating John) If you want to see the benefits or that spiritual shift in the children, then you need to take that first step.

Tere: Oh no, thank you for bringing that up, because that was one of the things I did in my therapy a couple of years ago. See, without even noticing that I'm....yeah, thank you for...yeah...(laughing...)

Wiremu: You know you are absolutely in charge of this, you can tell me to shut up! (laughing)

Tere: Its alright.

William (Moana's Stepfather): She's says that about me too.

Wiremu: About 'him'? (laughing)

William: I'm her husband but she calls me 'him'! (laughter)

Wiremu (laughing): Yeah and that's a good thing. Each and every one of us in this room has a gift. We all have gifts. And I would say you have a gift and Moana has also got a gift. And I haven't picked up any sort of evil intent on the part of the old people. Actually I would say there is a group of tūpuna (ancestors) who have a strong motivation to bring it right for the family. And so I put that down as them calling out, hey this is a... what do you call it, not a warning, a wakeup call. And one of the ways to start is saying his name.

Wiremu explained that he had come to the conclusion that the rift that the tūpuna (ancestors) were protesting about was the problem between the parents. He said that it was necessary for the wellbeing of Moana and the other children that the adults find some way to reconcile their differences.

Initially Tere didn't respond to this, but Wiremu came back to it. I noticed he did so with a lot of warmth and aroha (love) but also clarity. At this point, Tere seemed to soften. She paused for some moments. Then she turned and looked directly at her ex-husband John and began to solemnly utter each word as she started to speak directly to him. She began: 'I am going to pretend that we are the only two people in this room'. For the first time in the meeting she used John's name. She acknowledged that this was the first time they had been in a room together for more than 3 years. She began to speak about some of the matters that had caused pain between them. At this point she paused and seemed to hesitate.

After looking at Wiremu, Tere turned to John once more and began to apologise for the hurtful things she had said over the years. She spoke about a number of matters that she believed may have brought pain to John and asked if he would forgive her.

Then it was John's turn to speak. He acknowledged Tere in their mother tongue. Similarly, he spoke about times when he had become very angry. He also apologised for times when he had done something that caused pain to her. He said that he did

forgive her and wanted to find a way to improve things for the sake of their children. In addition, he also apologised to Tere's new husband, William, for any offence he may have caused him. By this time tears were falling from Tere's eyes onto her cheeks. As she began to wipe them away I noticed tenderness in John's eyes as he looked at her, replacing the uncompromising look I had seen earlier in the session. As their eyes met I sensed that they had both allowed bitterness and resentment they had been holding onto for a long time to be released. The tension so evident at the beginning of the session had lifted.

Wiremu acknowledged what had been shared and the courage it had taken from all parties. In the pause that followed, Tere's four year old son burst into the room with a picture he had drawn for his Mum and Dad to look at. While Tere and William admired the picture, I left the room to check on his sisters. The session was nearing the end of the allotted time and Wiremu knew that it would be important to whakanoa (make free from tapu) the process of reconciliation. He invited the adults present to shake hands or embrace one another if they felt comfortable to do so. He then embraced each of the three parents in turn and they embraced each other.

After the children returned, I noticed that they looked more relaxed. I asked Wiremu if he wanted to say a karakia (prayer) at this point and he said that it wasn't necessary. He mentioned that he could see that there had been a change and that this was enough for now. I suggested that we might explain to the children something about what had happened in the room in their absence, and Wiremu suggested I do that. Accordingly I proceeded to explain that Wiremu had said that there were some ancestors in the family who were concerned, wanting to help the family and wanted the adults to sort out some things, so Wiremu had been encouraging Moana and Melanie's mother and father to let go of some hurt from the past.

At this point Wiremu departed and I arranged a further appointment time with Tere and Moana. However, the parents and stepfather asked if they could spend some more time talking over matters they needed to sort out that had been unresolved over the last few years. This took a further 2 hours. The children had some lunch and then played together in my office. There was lightness in Moana's countenance as she joked with Melanie and looked after her brother.

When I phoned Tere to check on progress the following week, she said that from the time of the session with Wiremu there had been a very marked change in Moana. She seemed happy and there were no more concerns about her behaviour at night. She wasn't anxious anymore about going off to sleep. Over the following months when we met, Moana was well and there were no more reports of agitated behaviour or any of the other night-time behaviour that had been so worrying and perplexing for Moana's family. Tere described Moana as back to her normal self. Two years later Moana was continuing to thrive.

Wiremu's Perspective On The Session

On entering the room to meet this family for the first time, my attention was instantly drawn to one particular young lass (Moana) and I immediately recognised who, of the two girls, I was supposed to meet. When I observed her more closely, there was a spiritual presence there that showed itself to me and then withdrew. I

detected an old lady who appeared to be within Moana, a presence there that others couldn't see. The old lady was loving, but she was also stern, like a disciplinarian kind of kuia (female elder). When I mentioned the presence, Tere asked me what gender, and I replied, 'How did you get on with your grandmother?'

Well, the kuia (female elder) showed herself again to me, and I noticed that there were several gentlemen in the background. One was solidly built and round like myself with a yellow t-shirt or singlet on. He had a pleasant face and very short hair. He was seated. And standing next to him was an older man with a beard that had been left to grow wild, and he had longish hair with grey streaks. It looked like a discussion was taking place. It felt like it was in a village setting, perhaps from Tere and John's home. They were concerned but at the same time I could tell that they were really supportive of what was taking place. Their wish seemed to be that whatever was happening to Moana would be brought to a halt with reconciliation.

By this time I'd asked the children to leave the room. I did this because I was concerned that some of the talk about supernatural things might be scary for the children. And I was already confident that the main problem that the tūpuna (ancestors) were protesting about was the raruraru (conflict) between the biological parents. I was also concerned that in the midst of that kōrero (conversation), the mana, mauri and tapu of the children could be compromised if they were drawn into the adult conflict. It was better that they weren't part of that adult process.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with these concepts from Te Ao Māori (the New Zealand Māori world), I would say that a person's mauri is their life force. Even objects can have a mauri. But even more than this, mauri as it has been taught to me, is about 'being in relationship to the creator', which is the life force. Tapu, I would view as the sacredness of that relationship. Mana is the spiritual authority or power invested in a person or whānau (family). It is the mana that comes from that relationship (with Io/God/the creator) and other key relationships which give a person the authority to have control over themselves, their circumstances, and other entities that may be impinging on them.

Later during the kōrero (conversation), Tere used the word 'demonic'. I responded to this by saying that sometimes we are influenced by Christianity to believe that things that we can't explain are demonic. However I was sure that this situation was different. It was clear to me that this was a wakeup call for the whānau (family). I heard the kuia (female elder) saying that if they would not look after this young lass then she was going to 'take her'. This wake-up call was to tell the parents to reconcile their differences for the benefit of the children. Interestingly, the old lady took on two different forms during the course of our hui (meeting). At the beginning when I saw the old wāhine (woman) she had longish grey hair and thin features. At the end of the interview when Moana re-entered the room I saw the same lady but this time she appeared younger and happier. At that moment my experience was that she seemed separate, slightly to the side of Moana as if she had stepped back at that point, whereas at the beginning she appeared to be located within Moana, as if she was part of her. It was after the session when I next had an opportunity to speak to Allister that I came to understand that the old woman I heard and saw was actually Tere's great great grandmother.

During the session Tere kept referring to John, Moana's biological father as 'he' and 'him'. I asked her to use his name, John, because he had a name and if they wanted to resolve whatever was happening to their daughter then she could start that

process right there. She took it upon herself with heaps of courage to speak directly to John for the first time, and then asked for forgiveness for hurting him. She spoke about their daughters and how beautiful they were. So something really good came out of the reunion. John replied when it came around to him. He acknowledged her in their own language. He talked about forgiveness. Acknowledging her in the Cook Island Māori language was significant because this provided a korowai (cloak of protection) to the situation. It brought cultural and spiritual safety and in doing so, John was also acknowledging Tere's mana (spiritual authority) and the mana of her ancestors. He apologised to Tere's husband. Later, after I left, I was told that they spent another 2 hours after our session together making up for the time that they had not been communicating. This suggested to me that an important reconciliation had begun.

Now towards the end of the session I knew we needed to find a way to complete the process for that moment. From my point of view, in Te Ao Māori (the New Zealand Māori world) we would usually whakanoa (make free from tapu) a tapu (sacred or forbidden) process such as this with a hongī⁴ and kai (sharing of food). This is about making a sacred process safe for ordinary interactions again. But for this setting, I suggested that the participants might choose to shake hands or embrace one another if they felt comfortable to do so, as a way to whakanoa the reconciliation for the current moment. After this the children were asked to come back in. I was asked if we should karakia for Moana and I said no because she appeared to be different. I noticed that the taumaha or heaviness had been lifted off her. And so I declined and left it to the family because with the reconciliation came the restoration of their mana (spiritual authority) and it was well within their whānau (family) to be able to solve the situation. The minute that they had begun the reconciliation process there had been a spiritual shift.

Tere's Perspective On The Session

Early in the meeting with Wiremu I needed to test him to find out if he really did have the spiritual awareness to help Moana and our family. I felt vulnerable and felt I needed to protect my family in case he wasn't the right person. When I asked him, 'What gender?' I was shocked when he replied, 'How did you get on with your grandmother?' How did he know about my great great grandmother? It was like having some layers peeled off. As well as feeling shocked, I felt more at ease and connected to him because he had that knowledge. I sensed he was strong enough to help us, that he wasn't going to take any crap!

Later when Wiremu suggested that I start calling John by his name, it was like 'Ouch!' Someone had said something so truthful to me that I couldn't ignore it. I couldn't challenge it because he was so gentle about it but at the same time firm and sincere. By this time in our meeting I trusted him a lot due to the other things he knew. The trust between me and Wiremu had been built up over this short time as he knocked my walls down! I found it very hard to turn to John and speak directly to him. Wiremu's presence there really helped me. He believed in me. What was in his eyes gave me courage. I was able to draw on the inner strength and spiritual strength that came out of him. I told myself, 'It has to happen now'.

The session that day helped with some kind of closure for what our family was going through. Having everyone there in the same room, having a child psychiatrist,

a cultural therapist, a whole fruit salad there! It really helped that we could talk about it in front of a doctor and in front of a cultural person, knowing that what we were going through was ok. That was very compelling. Wiremu was able to put into words some things that I couldn't really understand in a way that helped me understand them. It was more powerful because he understood that spiritual stuff, and the culture. Even though he was a New Zealand Māori he understood it! For example, he helped me see that the whole demonic thing was really a cultural thing. I was taken aback by that. It made me think again and helped me acknowledge and embrace a cultural view alongside my religious beliefs. It really made sense.

He also picked up that day that the stuff that Moana was going through was a lot of unresolved stuff between us as parents that had gone onto our child. I'd never spoken to him before. But he was explaining the story of what our family had been going through in a way that made sense. His explanation was like a familiar territory to me. I had my own experience of Moana's situation and I also knew about the things I experienced as I grew up.

As for Moana, the improvement in her state of mind after our session with Wiremu was dramatic. That same day it was like a whole weight had been peeled off her. She looked more peaceful than I had seen her for at least 6 months. She was much less anxious at night and sleeping much better. No more nightmares or worries. She began to bloom like a flower again. There were no more episodes of her becoming enraged. She was back to her normal caring, loving self again. She was able to communicate and talk about her feelings again like she had before all this started.

If you were to ask me what of Wiremu's gifts led to the healing for our family, I would say it was all of his gifts. It was the package deal. His ability to see the spiritual side interacted with his healing understanding, that is, his knowing about what had to take place for healing to happen for our family. He was able to connect with all of us in a profound way and very quickly gain our trust. He was able to challenge us in a loving way. Most importantly for me, he acknowledged the relationship between all of us and God, our higher power. He said that he could do nothing without that and that anything good that came from our time together was not from him but came about through that authority. Without that nothing would happen. This acknowledgement was one reason I felt confident to trust him.

Some months after this meeting, Allister showed me a video of Wiremu speaking about what he had seen during the meeting that day. As well as the old woman, my great great grandmother who he had mentioned that day, he also described two men whom he hadn't talked about at that time. When I saw the video and heard his description, I wasn't sure who the men might be. But when I talked to my mother about it she said that the descriptions fitted my grandfather and great grandfather exactly. My grandfather, who died before my mother was born was known for being clean cut, large and often wearing khaki shorts and a yellow singlet. Moana was named after him.

Discussion

'I hangaia tātou e te kaihanga, kia hikoi tātou te hikoi tāngata.'

'We were created by Io (God) to journey this earth as humans. First and foremost we are spiritual beings experiencing a human existence.'

(Whakataurangi (proverb), Wiremu NiaNia).

This paper gives a detailed account of New Zealand Māori traditional healing work with a Cook Island Māori family in which the eldest daughter was in considerable distress. The practitioner, Wiremu NiaNia, made it clear to the family at the outset that he did not consider himself to be an expert, especially when it came to understanding the nuances of Cook Island Māori language, culture and world views. Furthermore, he was very specific that if anything helpful was to come from the session then he could not accept any credit for it. Any benefit from his involvement could come only from his source (Io or God). However Tere, the young person's mother, described the session as having a healing effect on her family and her daughter, despite the differences between New Zealand Māori and Cook Island Māori culture and world views.

Superficially the methods used by Wiremu to address this problem, may resemble some family therapy approaches. However the quote above illustrates his world view, and is consistent with New Zealand Māori traditional understandings which contrast sharply with secular western family therapy traditions.

Wiremu's method of assessment involved him 'picking up' an intuitive sense of the family's predicament based on his spiritual discernment of the situation and his perceptions not only of the appearance, intentions and communications from family members in the therapy room, but also from deceased ancestors whom he perceived as present in the room. This understanding, that the dead may be as present as the living, is a core principle in New Zealand Māori philosophical thinking and in other cultures indigenous to the Pacific region, although it departs significantly from secular and scientific understandings which are dominant in clinical and psychiatric paradigms (Bush, Collings, Tamasese & Waldegrave, 2005; Durie, 2009).

A culturally appropriate way for a Cook Island Māori family to address a cultural problem could be to seek advice from a senior cultural authority from their own community. Although Wiremu made it clear that he could not profess to grasp the nuances of Cook Island Māori culture, language, meaning and experience, there are some parallels in world views between New Zealand Māori and Cook Island Māori traditions, including understandings about concepts such as tapu (sacred or forbidden people, places or processes) and mana (spiritual authority) (Baddeley, 1985), which are shared widely among cultures in the Pacific region. Maki tūpāpaku is an expression in the Cook Island Māori language that refers to a kind of 'spirit illness' in which the sufferer may be affected by strange behaviour and severe emotional distress (Baddeley, 1985). From a Cook Island Māori perspective such afflictions are often viewed as resulting from a breakdown in social or family relationships. Ta'unga (Cook Island Māori traditional healers) have been described as commonly spending a great deal of time consulting with the affected family, facilitating the resolution of any unresolved matters such as grievances or conflict that are viewed as being at the heart of the problem (Baddeley, 1985). In this way the 'sick person' in this context is helped by a process of family healing, rather than being treated in isolation.

These Cook Island Māori perspectives have similarities to Wiremu's New Zealand Māori world views. Such links, along with his spiritual insights and understanding of the family's predicament, his articulation of the identified cause of this, his ability to connect strongly and empathically with both estranged parents, and use his own mana (spiritual authority) and mauri (life force) to encourage a change during the session seemed to be key factors in the healing experienced by this family.

The methods that Wiremu used are consistent with descriptions of the practice of tōhunga (New Zealand Māori traditional healers) from several sources (Durie, 2009; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Moon, 2003; Parsons, 1985). Such practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand were severely impacted by European colonisation during which early colonial authorities sought to marginalise and later eradicate traditional healing through legal means such as the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907 (Durie, 2001, 2009). This occurred in a context of alienation of Māori land, banning of the use of Te Reo Māori (New Zealand Māori language) in schools, and colonial suppression of key Māori institutions such as the ancient tōhunga wānanga (centres of learning) which supported and affirmed Māori ways of life (Durie, 2001). Despite this, New Zealand Māori communities and whānau continued to discretely turn to their tōhunga for guidance and intervention when they believed healing was required (Durie, 2001, 2009). It was not until 1964 that the Tohunga Suppression Act was repealed. Since then, there has been a greater degree of acceptance of the work of tōhunga not only by Māori but also in the wider community. Durie describes tōhunga using a three stage healing process including assessment, spiritual reparation and instigating an appropriate remedy (Durie, 2009). It is commonly accepted in New Zealand Māori communities that certain individuals have the ability to perceive communications from deceased ancestors, and it is expected that tōhunga may use such abilities as part of their therapeutic assessment (Durie, 2009; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Moon, 2003; Parsons, 1985). Similarly, descriptions of traditional healing work in the Cook Islands indicate that ta'unga (Cook Island Māori traditional healers) are also commonly accepted as having such abilities (Baddeley, 1985).

In both Cook Island Māori and New Zealand Māori traditions, frequently identified causes of spiritual distress include relational breaches or conflicts and the appropriate remedy may therefore include ways of healing such breaches. A similar philosophy can be found among other cultures indigenous to the Pacific region, whereby breaches may be understood to be intergenerational and may involve both the living and the dead (Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave & Bush, 2005). In these cases and consistent with these philosophies, spiritual reparation, relational reconciliation, seeking forgiveness and atonement are often viewed as appropriate ways of alleviating distress. Ultimately the focus is to address breaches, release burdens and restore and rebalance relational harmony, in ways that are positive for all. Broadening beyond the social into what would be considered spiritual, means that karakia (prayers) (Durie, 2009; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Moon, 2003) may be a key aspect of the therapeutic work and this is frequently part of Wiremu's practice (Bush & NiaNia, 2012).

Conclusions

Indigenous communities in the Pacific and elsewhere have called for traditional healers to be employed alongside other mental health professionals working with their communities (Incayawar, 2009; Tamasese et al., 2005). This account shows that close and sincere collaboration between an indigenous traditional healer and a health professional (in this case a child psychiatrist), can offer a family in distress healing possibilities that may not be available to them in conventional child mental health or other family therapy settings.

Endnotes

- ¹ The terms mana, tapu and mauri are difficult to translate into English as there are no corresponding English words. From New Zealand Māori perspectives, these concepts are interrelated and they are relational concepts, for example someone may have mana only in relation to other people, deities and/or Io/God. Wiremu describes mauri as a life force or energy that is integral to 'being in relationship to the creator', who he views as 'the life force'. Tapu he defines as the sacredness of that relationship and tapu may also refer to a person, place, thing or ritual that is sacred or forbidden. Mana is the spiritual authority, energy or power embodied in a person which originates from that relationship with God/Io/their creator. Similar definitions have been articulated by other Māori authors (Royal, 2003). For the purposes of brevity, in this paper mauri will be translated as 'life force', tapu as 'sacred or forbidden' and mana as 'spiritual authority'.
- ² Maki tūpāpaku is a Cook Island Māori expression that refers to a form of ancestor spirit possession (Daniela, pers. comm., 2013).
- ³ The Cook Islands comprise fifteen islands spread across more than two million square kilometres in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. This nation is self-governing and has a long standing close political relationship with New Zealand. The capital Avarua is situated on the island of Rarotonga. The Cook Island Māori language is also known as Te Reo Ipukarea, or Rarotongan. It includes a number of dialects and is considered to be closely related to the New Zealand Māori language.
- ⁴ Exchange of breath - representing the mauri (life force) - which takes place when two people press their noses together (Moon, 2003).

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