

# Te Vaka Atafaga: a Tokelau Assessment Model for Supporting Holistic Mental Health Practice with Tokelau People in Aotearoa, New Zealand

## Kupa Kupa

### Foreword

*Ni alofaaga mo koutou na Tamana ma Matua pele kua momoe atu. Pe ko fea lava e tafea ai e mau pea te aganuku i te loto. Salapima Fuli o tei ko la.*

### Abstract

*Despite the emergence of dedicated Pacific mental health services in Aotearoa, New Zealand in the last 10 years, there have been few published Pacific models of mental health assessment to guide clinicians working with Pacific clients and their families.<sup>1</sup> Te Vaka Atafaga is a Tokelau model consisting of 6 core concepts which are considered key aspects of health for Tokelau people. This model was endorsed by Tokelau community representatives and leaders at the Inaugural Tokelau Health National Conference held in Wellington New Zealand in 1992.<sup>2</sup> The author relates the personal and professional journey that he has taken 'aboard' Te Vaka Atafaga over a twenty year period from conceptualisation, development and through to application in clinical practice in a mental health setting in Aotearoa, New Zealand.*

## Introduction

### “He Toeaina ke nofo i te mulivaka” “An Elder to sit at the canoe’s stern”

This Tokelau proverb acknowledges the place of ‘toeaina’ (elders) sitting at the stern of the Vaka, to oversee the welfare and safety of the crew, directing and advising them using their vast knowledge, experience and wisdom.

For Pacific families, embarking on a mental health assessment can feel like a journey into uncharted waters. This proverb could be viewed as a reminder to mental health clinicians that part of the art of engaging with and empowering Pacific families in addressing mental health problems, is finding creative ways of harnessing the wisdom inherent in the families’ knowledge and lived experiences and their Pacific culture.

Tokelau consists of three atolls in the South Pacific Ocean between 171° and 173° W longitude and 8° and 10° S latitude and lying approximately 500 km north of Samoa. Tokelau has been inhabited for over a thousand years with frequent inter-Island sea journeys on different types of ‘paopao’ (outrigger canoes) between the Tokelau atolls, as well as between Tokelau and other Islands such as Samoa.<sup>3</sup> Olosega is the fourth atoll known by my people however it was taken by the United States of America nearly 100 years ago and, is under their protection.

Olosega was populated mainly by people from Fakaofu and Nukunono at that time.

In the last 120 years, European colonisation of Pacific nations led to Tokelau becoming a British Protectorate and in 1926 our nation came under the jurisdiction of New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> As one of three Pacific nations including Niue and the Cook Islands that have citizenship in New Zealand, there is a special relationship between Tokelau and Aotearoa, New Zealand. The population in Tokelau in 2006 was 1,466 between the three atolls of Fakaofu, Nukunono and Atafu. In comparison, the Tokelau population living in New Zealand in 2006 was recorded as 6,819.<sup>4</sup> While this makes up only 3 percent of the Pacific population in New Zealand, in some urban centres such as Porirua, Tokelau people make up as much as 16% of the Pacific community.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1960s Aotearoa, New Zealand began to implement a resettlement programme, shifting many Tokelau families to these shores on the pretext of, managing the increasing problem of overcrowding on the small atolls.<sup>3</sup> Also at that time the economy of Aotearoa, New Zealand was expanding and Pacific migrants helped fill labour shortages in factories in urban New Zealand. Tokelau men came to these shores as early as 1958.

My family arrived in New Zealand in 1970 and after leaving school I was drawn to work in the health sector.

In the last 20 years I have worked as a Psychiatric Assistant and then following my nursing training, as a Registered Comprehensive Nurse in forensic mental health and more recently in service development in a primary care organisation in Wellington.

During my training, I was introduced to two cultural frameworks for guiding mental health clinicians in culturally appropriate values and practice. The first of these was Te Whare Tapa Whā, a Māori model now widely used in Māori mental health.<sup>5</sup> The first Pacific model of care I learned was that of the 'Fonofale' model, which reflects the cultural values<sup>1</sup> of Samoa. While there were aspects of this model that had relevance for Tokelau people, I realised that cultural concepts unique to Tokelau were not captured or articulated fully. Two examples of such concepts are 'Fatu Paepae' and 'Inati'.<sup>3,6,7,8</sup> 'Fatu Paepae' is a matriarchal title carried only by elder women who are responsible for overseeing the welfare of and care of the entire extended kaiga. This means that the 'Fatu Paepae' holds a privileged leadership role, and is very influential in key family decisions.

The 'Inati' is a Tokelau cultural practice that governs the sharing of food and communal resources. When a village engages in communal fishing expeditions, the entire catch is brought back to 'Te Laulau', the traditional area of land where everything is shared, and it is then distributed to the whole village. Under this system a woman with young children but no husband or, no descendents to help with the communal fishing will receive an equal share of the catch, to a family with many able bodied men who also took part in the communal fishing. This 'inati' system ensures ongoing support for each other and helps to sustain the whole community in times of need and hardship. Understanding such social support systems is relevant for mental health assessment and treatment planning for Tokelau people in their communities in Tokelau, in Aotearoa New Zealand or, on the international arena.

Recent research highlighted the importance of Pacific models of practice for working with Pacific peoples with mental health problems.<sup>1</sup> A study by Agnew et al found that the Fonofale model, a metaphoric framework to conceptualise Pacific health, is the best known Pacific health belief model among Pacific mental health providers<sup>1</sup>. A health belief model suggests that there are ethnic specific considerations which contribute to wellbeing. It described three Pacific models that have been used to frame Pacific research practices. These are the 'Tivaevae' model from Cook Islands<sup>9</sup>, the 'Kakala' model from Tonga and the 'Fa'afaletui' model<sup>10</sup> which draws upon the traditional Samoa concept of the weaving together communal views and cultural knowledge. It has been

suggested by Kingi-Ulu et al that these frameworks could also be adapted to guide clinical practices with Pacific people in mental health.<sup>11</sup> Agnew et al also makes this distinction between Pacific models of health belief which use culturally derived metaphors to inform clinical practice, and models of service delivery in which Pacific service practices are more explicitly articulated at all levels including cultural, clinical and service management and delivery.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will describe the development of Te Vaka Atafaga as a Tokelau framework, which is a model of health belief that can also be used to shape aspects of service delivery such as mental health assessment and collaborative treatment planning with Tokelau families, and team review processes.

## Background: Cultural Identity

One of the most profound memories and experiences I have of Tokelau occurred at the age of about 3 years. At that time, I lived with my maternal grandparents Fuli and Sipaia at Te Paloa on the atoll of Fakaofu. One day I was carried by one of my uncles and placed into a traditional Vaka Atafaga, where we set sail for the outlying Islands taking a passage through the lagoon. I was not concerned with how long the travelling might take because there were many natural wonders that kept me fully occupied along the

way, such as the colourful reefs in the lagoon and the many sea birds that flew nearby. It was warm and sunny when we left Te Paloa, yet on arriving at 'Uta' across the other side of the lagoon, there was a tropical down pour of rain. Once we reached our destination my

uncle dragged our 'paopao' (outrigger canoe) onto the sand, with the back half of the 'paopao' still in the water. He left me inside the 'paopao' and instructed me to remain there, then covered me with the 'La' sail to shelter me from the down pour before leaving to harvest the 'pulaka' (taro) plantation. Once again I occupied myself by looking over the side of the 'paopao' watching the many different coloured fish that swam past. At one point I pulled the sail off me and immediately felt the full force of the rain driving hard against my bare skin and it was painful. My atoll environment was unsurpassed as a beautiful natural place of learning, and full of surprises, but as a young child it made me feel vulnerable at times.

My grandfather Fuli Fati left this world 8 years ago; he was a remarkable and wise man who had extensive knowledge and experiences of Tokelau philosophy, history, genealogy and culture. He had a great love for his people and family and was a very well respected member of the Tokelau communities in Aotearoa, New Zealand and abroad. He was also well respected amongst the people of Samoa and Tuvalu in Aotearoa, New Zealand and abroad. He

### The 'Inati' is a Tokelau cultural practice that governs the sharing of food and communal resources.

was a historian, a Tufuga (a Master) and Master Carver of the traditional Tokelau 'paopao', and a renowned traditional healer. During the 1970s my grandfather was permitted to practice in Wellington Hospital and he worked alongside hospital doctors to heal people from Tokelau and Samoa. Dr Ian Prior and Dr Antony Hooper were his Palagi (Pākehā) medical and anthropological colleagues and they often visited my Grandfather for advice. Later I was privileged to observe Fuli practicing traditional healing in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and helped him when he needed assistance. He used plants to make oils to treat physical ailments, as well as specific massage techniques. He taught me many things about the Tokelau culture and history, health and genealogy particularly about my Fakafo culture and history.

My father Lisone Kupa who has also left this world, was renowned for his knowledge of both the Tokelau and Samoa languages. He was an articulate orator and speaker. In his later years, he was a member of a group of 'toeaina' (elders) that undertook the challenge of translating the bible from the English into Tokelau language.

I share these personal experiences about my *kaiga* (family), *fenua* (land) and *aganuku* (traditions) because they have greatly influenced the development of Te Vaka Atafaga.

## The Formulation and Development of Te Vaka Atafaga

During my comprehensive nursing training in 1992, I was asked the question, 'What is your philosophy of health?' In the course of my research and reflection on this question I realised that for me, I was a Tokelau person first and, foremost by birth right and, secondly a nursing student. My Fakafo (Tokelau) identity was at my core and any metaphor that might encapsulate my philosophy of health had to come from my Tokelau culture. In searching for an image that Tokelau people could easily relate to, to illustrate a Tokelau philosophy of health, Te Vaka Atafaga gradually emerged. Te Vaka Atafaga is a traditional outrigger vessel with a sail. In choosing this image as a metaphor for health for Tokelau people I consulted extensively with my grandfather Fuli Fati. All of these long discussions were in the Tokelau language and in the course of this I translated all of the material from Tokelau to English, with the help of my Father.

An opportunity for cultural validation of this model came firstly with the Porirua Tokelau Health

Collective, a group of Tokelau mental health nurses in 1992, and later at the first Tokelau National Health Conference held in November 1992.<sup>2</sup> This conference was attended by 200 participants comprising Tokelau elders, health workers, enrolled and registered nurses, students, and participants from social service agencies and education. There was strong representation from each of the three Tokelau atolls, Fakafo, Nukunonu and Atafu.

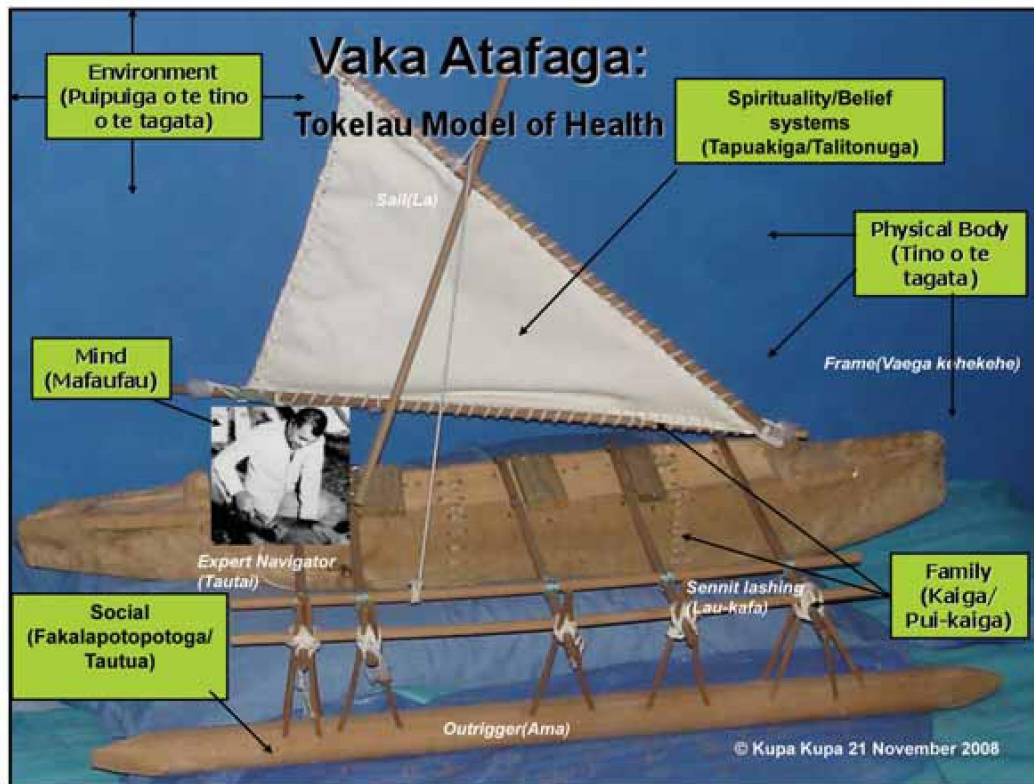
Before the Te Vaka Atafaga was presented to participants, the question was put forward, What are your thoughts on the total well-being/health of a Tokelau person?

Discussion groups were held in both English and Tokelau languages. The major themes that emerged from these group discussions highlighting Tokelau participants' definitions of health which included the following:

- **Fenua** - Natural environment
- **Te Tino o Te Tangata**- Human physique and physical fitness
- **Mafaufau** - Conscientiousness and strength of mind
- **Inati** - the system of sharing for the benefit of the kaiga
- **Tapuakiga / Talitonuga** - Ancient beliefs and Christianity
- **Kaiga** - Families and traditional sacred relationships between members

Following the group discussions I presented the Te Vaka Atafaga model in both the Tokelau and English languages. Tokelau participants endorsed the use of the 'paopao' as a model of general wellbeing and mental health that reflected values inherent to Tokelau culture. During the discussions a recommendation was made by participants that Te Vaka Atafaga be recognised as representing a nationally agreed perspective on Tokelau health.<sup>2</sup> In addition there were a number of participants from other Pacific nations such as Samoa and Tonga who spoke to me afterwards and said that they found the ideas applicable to their own cultural values and experience.

## Te Vaka Atafaga Defined



Te Vaka Atafaga is comprised of six components that are considered integral to the total wellbeing of a Tokelau person within the context of the extended kaiga.

### 1. Te tino o Te Tagata (Physical body)

The wooden structure of the *'paopao'* represents the physical body, with all the interrelated parts and their complementary function. From a Tokelau perspective while it is impossible to separate mind, body and spirit, it is important to be able to highlight the role of physical body, as without a well body, all the other aspects cannot be well.

### 2. Mafaufau (Mind)

*'Mafaufau'* is represented by the Tautai (expert fisherman and navigator) who steers the *'paopao'* and maintains it in good working order. He also controls the direction in which he will travel. The Tautai relies on his memories, strength of mind, wisdom and knowledge to guide the *'paopao'* carefully and safely through the sea at all times. Since the Tautai fully commands the *'paopao'*, his course will depend ultimately on his wellbeing. Similarly, if a person is in a state of mental unwellness then this may place their own wellbeing and that of others close to them in jeopardy or, at extreme risk.

### 3. Kaiga / Pui- kaiga (Family)

The intertwined threads of *'Lau-kafa'* (sennit or rope made from coconut husk) symbolise the Tokelau family structure with individual family members bound together by complicated dynamics over time to form a strong extended *'kaiga'* (family) system. Each individual has their own role to play in the kaiga.

*'Lau-kafa'* takes many months to prepare in a traditional manner and is highly prized in Tokelau and imbued with deep cultural significance<sup>12</sup>. In the past it was used in the construction of traditional Tokelau *'Fale'* (house) and *'Fale Fono'* (Village Meeting House), as well as *'Uka'* or fishing line. The *'Lau-kafa'* is used to lash large sections of the main frame together, as well as lashing joints together and securing the anchor to the *'paopao'*. It is also used for making fishing nets and other fishing tools.

Woven into the *'Lau-kafa'* are the values, beliefs, language, traditions, experiences, wisdom and history of my Tokelau ancestors. These are taught within the kaiga which promotes positive growth and development.

Like the *'Lau-kafa'* which is extremely strong and flexible, the kaiga gives you strength and support, builds resilience and keeps you grounded in your experience and reality.

#### 4. Tapuakiga / Talitonuga (Spirituality/ Belief systems)

The 'La' (sail) represents spirituality because it is driven by a 'Pule' (power) or equivalent word Mana (power) that cannot be seen, yet the influence can be felt and can be seen at work in various ways.

Before European contact, Tokelau had its own unique ancient belief systems. This encompassed gods and spirits that the people believed in and worshipped. This is evident in the large stone slab known as the God 'Tui-Tokelau' that presently stands on the Atoll of Fakaofu in Tokelau and represents our traditional belief systems.

Belief systems were an integral part of life. Some beliefs were that causes for illness were due to evil spirits. In such situations there were expert healers that treated people who became ill in this way. Such practices and healers still exist today. These traditional healers are the preferred first line health practitioners for many Tokelau people. An example of their various methods of 'fofo' (traditional healing practices) include the use of plants and plant extracts to treat physical conditions, as well as practices that are believed to 'chase evil spirits away'.

Following European influence things changed. Christianity was introduced which suppressed but did not obliterate all of the previous beliefs. The stone God Tui-Tokelau was replaced with the Almighty God, yet it still has prestigious significance within the culture because of its symbolic place in Tokelau history.

#### 5. Puipuiga o Te tino o Te Tagata (Environment)

This refers to all things that make up the physical environment that is outside of and surrounds the 'paopao', which influence a person's wellbeing. Traditional accounts name four atolls that make up Tokelau; Fakaofu, Nukunonu, Atafu and Olosega.<sup>3,6,7</sup> Our environment sustains us. It provides food sources including plantations of pulaka (a species of taro), and species of bird as well as different types of fish found only in the lagoon, or in the deep sea beyond the reefs. Plants used for traditional healing are also found in the outer Islands.

The environment clearly has had an impact on Tokelau health both in Tokelau itself and for Tokelau people in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and is presented in the following way:

##### **Tau (weather)**

Despite glamorised images of Tokelau as a tropical paradise, our vulnerability to tropical cyclones and storm surges, mean that Tokelau is at the mercy of the weather. Tokelau is no more than five meters

above sea level with the total land area of only 12 km<sup>2</sup> and the soil is made up of sand and coral rubble. In the cyclones of 1987, people on the atoll of Fakaofu reported seeing breaking waves that were higher than the palm trees. Violent winds caused major destruction to all three atolls. Many of the fruiting trees such as; banana, pawpaw, breadfruit and coconut palm were levelled by the strong winds. Water sources were contaminated. Live stock such as chickens and pigs were also lost. Immediately after this Tokelau relied heavily on outside assistance especially for food and clean water.

##### **Fenua (land)**

The land area is small yet this is where the resources are obtained such as food, shelter, and materials needed to make repairs to the paopao and for making crafts. A more significant cultural-spiritual aspect of Tokelau as 'land', is that it is the birth place of many Tokelauan's and therefore one's identity, language, memories, learning and heritage is connected to the land.

##### **Moana (sea) & Namu (lagoon)**

There are areas of the deep sea and the lagoon where different varieties of fish and other sea foods are gathered. The lagoon also serves as the means of journeying from one 'motu' (islet) to another.

##### **Lagi (sky)**

The sky can warn of the coming weather pattern and will determine whether the tautai will go out on deep sea fishing expeditions or travel to the other outlying motu to harvest plantations.

##### **Fetu (stars)**

These have served as a compass for direction on journeys, and particular star formations can be identified by name such as 'Na Taki O Mataliki'.

##### **Mahina (moon)**

There are different varieties of fish that are abundant during the moons cycle. This knowledge helps to inform fishermen of what is available at different times and when. The knowledge that has been passed down through the generations lets the fishermen know where they must go to catch their bounty of fish, and the methods of fishing to use. The moon is also used to light up the path during night time fishing expeditions.

##### **Mata Matagi (winds from the different directions)**

There are an identified number of directions from where the wind comes and goes in Tokelau as well as the months these are expected, and there are different names given to the winds which have various levels of velocity. These range from the favourable 'Tokelau' to the much stronger 'Timuatoga'.

***Ea lelei (air)***

While air is vital to people's existence, Tokelau people recognise the need to breathe fresh clean air.<sup>3,6,7,8</sup> In New Zealand, the environment also has a major impact on the health and wellbeing of Tokelau people. Following the resettlement of Tokelau families to a number of cities in Aotearoa, New Zealand, families had to withstand extreme climate changes from Tokelau's hot tropical sun to the much colder conditions.

Children born to these families were also exposed to environmental pressures such as media, school and peers which presented conflicting cultural values. Young people bombarded with New Zealand culture frequently had difficulties maintaining Tokelau customs, practices and language. Daily stresses related to settling in to this new land included; learning to speak English, learning to operate seemingly simple yet complicated electrical appliances such as ovens, learning the value and use of money, maintaining contact with extended family members who were settled far away into other areas like Auckland, and settling into new jobs and schools.

**6. Fakalapopotoga / Tautua (Social / Support systems).**

The *'ama'* or outrigger represents social structure or organisations. The main body of the *'paopao'* needs the support and stability of the *'ama'* in order to stay afloat. There are deep values in Tokelau culture that promote social and economic equality. The *'inati'* system ensures that a person is well supported.

**Clinical Application**

This example will illustrate how the *'paopao'* may serve as a framework to guide clinical practice by exploring each of the components described previously.

Tahi was an 18 year old Tokelau man admitted into an acute mental health unit at Porirua Hospital. He had been referred by his general practitioner after his family became overwhelmed and fearful about his disturbed and threatening behaviour. I was asked to meet Tahi and his family to assist the inpatient team with both clinical and cultural assessment in the Tokelau language.

One of the important Tokelau values when communicating with people is the use of words to show respect or *'Fakaaloalo'*.<sup>3,6,7,8</sup> The name Te Vaka Atafaga specifically identifies this type of outrigger canoe, but can simply be referred to as a *'paopao'* which describes and encompasses all the different types of Tokelau canoes. Initially I use the name Te Vaka Atafaga, but throughout this paper I refer to it as *'Paopao'*.<sup>6,7</sup> I also identify *'Fatu Paepae'*, but refer to this same person as simply *'Matua'*.<sup>6,7,8</sup> which is a respectful term meaning *'Mother'*. During this

assessment I was careful to apply respectful terms when referring to Tahi and his family.

Before commencing the assessment I made sure that Tahi and his family were comfortable in the assessment room and that there would be no disruptions during the assessment process. I then greeted Tahi and each family member in their language. I enquired about how they wished to begin the process knowing that they might want to start with a *'lotu'* or prayer. During the interview I paced interactions and questions carefully, following cues from Tahi and his family. I knew that the sharing of information would take time and might take more than one session. If Tahi and his family felt they had been cut off while they were talking, they might feel disempowered and less willing to cooperate. During the interview I was mindful of culturally important nonverbal behaviour and kept my voice tone quiet, and avoided eye contact for long periods, pausing from time to time to allow brief rest periods when I thought the family needed that and making sure that refreshments were available. I was careful to explain in detail what the family could expect from the process at the outset and offered them the option of closing the session with a prayer.

**1. Mafaufau (Mind)**

When I interviewed Tahi on his own he admitted to me that he had been hearing several voices swearing and criticising him for two months. During this time he had begun to feel suspicious of friends and close family members and became fearful that he might be attacked. Although he was not depressed, he was often tense and he was sleeping poorly. He had taken to keeping a softball bat under his bed at night and had confronted an uncle with this.

**2. Tapuakiga / Talitonuga (Spirituality/ Belief systems)**

Because of his disturbed behaviour his family believed that Tahi was experiencing a state of *'Uluhia'* (spirit possession) and had taken him to see a Tokelau *'Fofu'* or traditional healer. However, when the Fofu had assessed Tahi, he concluded that his symptoms were not consistent with *'Uluhia'*. Tahi told the Fofu that he had been smoking marijuana. The *'Fofu'* told the family to take Tahi to their family doctor as he did not treat drug use, which he believed was a likely cause for Tahi's experiences and bizarre behaviour. After this, Tahi had stopped smoking marijuana for 2 weeks but his auditory hallucinations and persecutory beliefs intensified during this time.

The family were Presbyterian and had strong Christian beliefs alongside their traditional Tokelau beliefs.

### 3. Kaiga / Pui-kaiga (Family)

Tahi was the second eldest of 6 siblings and the eldest son. He had responsibilities for the welfare of his siblings. I learned that there had been high expectations of him excelling at school and attending university however his father had died three years before in a work accident leaving the family without a provider. At this point Tahi left school and got a labourers job.

I learned that his Mother was the '*Matua*' or '*Fatu Paepae*' in their extended family. This meant that she was a key person for the mental health team to get a strong rapport with, in order to collaborate on building an effective management plan after discharge from hospital. If she was convinced that the plan was sound, then she would very likely be able to persuade other family members to support the agreed treatment for his psychotic illness. I also learnt that Tahi had a cousin on his Father's side who had been treated for a psychotic illness in his early adulthood.

### 4. Te Tino o Te Tagata (The Physical Body)

Tahi was a fit young man who until 3 months before had been an active rugby player. Physical examination by an admitting doctor had been considered normal. He had a circular burn scar on his left arm from 'fooling around with friends' with a cooking fire in Tokelau at the age of ten.

### 5. Puipuiga o Te Tino o Te Tagata (Environment)

Tahi was born in Aotearoa, New Zealand but went to Tokelau at the age of 5 and lived with his paternal grandparents there, returning at the age of twelve to his parents and siblings in New Zealand. Having missed his family at age 5, his adjustment back into New Zealand at age 12 was also difficult as he had lost confidence with English and had to work hard to catch up at school. Having been immersed in the strong Tokelau inati values, he was suddenly exposed to the individual values of his peers and the media pressure in New Zealand and at times felt torn between his responsibilities to serve his family and the 'New Zealand lifestyle of following your own wishes, that his peers enjoyed.

### 6. Fakalapopotoga / Tautua (Social / Support systems)

Tahi's Mother's '*Fatu Paepae*' status and '*Inati*' values meant that there had been plenty of support from the extended family after the death of his Father. Two of his younger siblings had gone to live with an aunt and uncle nearby. Other relatives would often provide meals and assist with the family's other needs. However Tahi's role as eldest sibling and now a Father figure in the household was a source of considerable stress for him as a teenager. His pay packet was given to his Mother to manage on behalf of

the family. He had very little opportunity to relax or go out with friends and he had increasingly felt resentful of this, which had contributed to his recent marijuana use. It was clear to me that assisting the family in attending to this dynamic and freeing him from some of the stress of his difficult role in the family, would be an important consideration in the medium and longer term treatment for his psychosis. At the same time his strong family system would be a great resource in his recovery, once they had come to understand more about the nature of his psychotic illness.

This clinical vignette illustrates how attending to each of the six components of Te Vaka Atafaga can guide a thorough mental health assessment and shed light on important cultural and family information that will determine key aspects of effective treatment for this young Tokelau person.

### Other applications of Te Vaka Atafaga

Following assessment Te Vaka Atafaga could be used as an interactive tool for developing a shared understanding or, shared formulation of helping Tahi and his family. By writing key points under the six headings up on a white board organised around a diagram of a Te Vaka Atafaga, the family had a visual representation of a holistic view of the problems Tahi was experiencing within the kaiga context. They added their comments to this situation, clarified points and asked questions about different elements. This process enhanced the family's understanding of a clinical view of the problem and promoted a shared cultural understanding between clinical assistance and the Tokelau cultural context of care and support. This shared formulation guided the development of a shared management plan. Such a process required a collaborative effort and empowered the family to steer their own direction, by sitting in the navigator's seat on Te Vaka Atafaga. This required that everyone involved including the family and clinical workers moved in unison. In this way everyone paddled in the same direction, to the same rhythm, and arrived at the same place together. Using a cultural metaphor can empower families to use their imagination and cultural thinking to help their children explore possibilities and options that are in line with their values and philosophy.

A further practical application of this model is that multidisciplinary mental health team assessment reviews can be presented and discussed using a Te Vaka Atafaga as a framework and a process for working with Tokelau families. The same six headings can be used as a framework for key points to attend to in treatment reviews and treatment planning in both inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment settings.

## Conclusions

Te Vaka Atafaga has been developed as a Tokelau metaphor that encompasses key Tokelau concepts that are considered integral to mental health and wellbeing. The development of this model was shaped by revered Tokelau 'toeaina' or elders such as Fuli Fati and Lisone Kupa and other toeina within my extended kaiga. Further cultural validation occurred when this model was endorsed by participants at the first National Tokelau Health Conference in New Zealand in 1992.<sup>2</sup> Recent research showed that this model is known to Tokelau workers in the mental health field in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

Te Vaka Atafaga can be used as a framework for mental health assessment with a Tokelau person. It can also be used as a visual model for developing a shared formulation with a Tokelau family about the mental health problems that their family member may be facing, with a view to developing a shared management plan with the family. A further application can shape multidisciplinary team processes to support holistic mental health practice.

Further development of Te Vaka Atafaga will require qualitative research to evaluate the acceptability of this model for clinicians as a tool to guide mental health assessment with Tokelau clients. Research with Tokelau families will be required to evaluate its acceptability as a model for developing shared mental health formulations with Tokelau families.

For Tokelau people, Te Vaka Atafaga reinforces the connection to cultural identity. This model has the potential to support Tokelau people in maintaining ties to their heritage, even amidst the distress and confusion associated with first experience of mental health problems and contact with mental health services.

This is encapsulated in the following Fakaofu proverb:

**'Fano koe ki Fakaofu ke matua mai ai'**

**'You must return to Fakaofu to understand  
and learn your culture and identity'**

## Acknowledgements

To Dr Allister Bush for his enthusiasm and support. Fakafetai lahi lele te uho. Acknowledgements are also given to my Maternal Grandfather, Fuli Fati and my Father Lisone Kupa for their guidance and wisdom and finally to my extended kaiga in Porirua for their support and knowledge in further development of Te Vaka Atafaga.

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