

Te Maramataka — The Temporal Spine of Te Ara Iwa

Restoring Indigenous Lunar Knowledge as the Living Rhythm of a Kaupapa Māori Wellness Journey

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Abstract

The Maramataka — the traditional Māori lunar calendar of Aotearoa New Zealand — is a sophisticated knowledge system integrating astronomy, ecology, agricultural practice, and spiritual orientation into a unified whole. This article examines the Maramataka's role as the temporal spine of Te Ara Iwa: the ninety-day, nine-step wellness journey at the heart of Te Poutama Ora (TPO), a nine-dimensional kaupapa Māori wellness framework developed at IAnTeMo Counselling.

Te Ara Iwa — the Path of Nine — carries within its name the number nine (Iwa), the architectural foundation of TPO; the concept of ara (path); and the name of the framework's maternal lineage. It is not a course with a fixed enrolment date. It is a living rhythm: three parallel cohorts moving simultaneously through the nine-step wellness journey, each beginning at their own Mawharu (the first night of the waxing moon) and completing ninety days later at Huna. The result is a programme that is continuously available, continuously alive.

Drawing on kaupapa Māori frameworks, decolonisation theory, and contemporary wellness literature, this article argues that the Maramataka is not cultural decoration within TPO but constitutive architecture — the temporal structure through which nine dimensions of human flourishing find their natural sequence, rhythm, and renewal. The article also introduces Te Ngāhau Kiri (Dimensional Autophagy) as the companion programme for participants whose healing requires deeper metabolisation before the seasonal tending of Te Ara Iwa can fully take root.

Keywords: Maramataka, Te Ara Iwa, Te Poutama Ora, kaupapa Māori, wellness, temporal spine, indigenous knowledge, lunar calendar, decolonisation, ninety-day programme, holistic health, Aotearoa

1. Introduction

We revisit the influence of Te Maramataka on development of Te Poutama Ora (TPO). Since writing the first articles it has become clearer how aligning with lunar rhythms to support sustained change fits naturally within TPO.

When Mason Durie (1994) introduced Te Whare Tapa Whā, he permanently shifted Aotearoa’s health conversation. Rather than mapping Māori wellness onto Western clinical frameworks, Durie proposed that wellbeing was multidimensional — held in the four walls of a whare: tinana (physical), hinengaro (mental and emotional), wairua (spiritual), and whānau (relational). That framework created space for others to follow.

Te Poutama Ora (TPO) builds on that kaupapa lineage. A nine-dimensional wellness model developed in Aotearoa, TPO extends the architectural metaphor of the whare into a Poutama — the stepped pattern of the tukutuku panel, representing growth, ascent, and the unfolding of potential. Its nine Pou include dimensions from identity and cultural wellness (Taha Tuakiri) at the centre, through to creative wellness (Taha Auaha) at the apex.

What distinguishes TPO from its predecessors, however, is not only its dimensional architecture. It is the presence of Maramataka — the Māori lunar calendar — as a living temporal infrastructure woven through every dimension of the programme. And the ninety-day programme through which participants walk the nine steps: Te Ara Iwa, the Path of Nine.

This article examines how that integration came to be, what it means in practice, and why it matters for the future of indigenous wellness design.

2. Maramataka: More Than a Calendar

The word Maramataka is often translated simply as “calendar,” but this translation flattens what is in fact a sophisticated ecological intelligence system (Mātāmua, 2017). The Māori lunar calendar tracks the movements of the moon, the stars, the tides, the seasons, and the behaviour of plants and animals across time. Each night of the lunar month carries its own name, its own energy signature, and its own invitation to action or rest.

Mātāmua (2017, p. 12) describes the Maramataka as “*a framework for understanding the relationships between celestial bodies, the natural environment, and human activity.*” In this framing, the calendar is not passive. It does not merely record time — it participates in it.

This distinction is central to TPO’s design philosophy. In Western programme models, time is linear and neutral: a twelve-week course is the same whether it begins in January or October, in a waxing moon or a waning one. In a Maramataka-informed framework, this assumption dissolves. Time is qualitative, not merely quantitative. Different moments are suited to different activities — and designing a wellness programme without attending to that qualitative difference is to design in the dark.

This is what the concept of Maramataka as temporal spine seeks to name. Rather than treating the Māori lunar calendar as cultural decoration — a karakia before the session, a Māori name in the title — TPO positions Maramataka as an active clinical architecture: the structural principle that governs when work is done, and why.

3. Te Poutama Ora: Framework Overview

Te Poutama Ora is structured around nine wellness dimensions, each named as a Pou — a post or pillar:

- Taha Whakapapa — Relational Wellbeing
- Taha Wairua — Spiritual Wellbeing
- Taha Tuakiri — Identity and Cultural Wellness (the central Pou)
- Taha Hinengaro — Mental and Emotional Wellbeing
- Taha Tinana — Physical Wellbeing
- Taha Matihiko — Digital Wellness
- Taha Pūtea — Financial Wellbeing
- Taha Kai — Puku and Gut Health
- Taha Auaha — Creative Wellness (the apex Pou)

Each dimension is understood not as a standalone category but as a Pou within a larger wharehau: structurally interdependent, all supporting the same roof. Wellness in one dimension creates conditions for wellness in others. Dysfunction in one dimension reverberates through the whole structure.

Taha Tuakiri stands at the centre as the Poutokomanawa — the central post. The theoretical position is that no other dimension of flourishing is accessible to its full depth without the individual first being grounded in who they are: their whakapapa, their relational identity, their sense of cultural belonging. Taha Auaha sits at the apex: creative wellness as both a healing instrument and the expression of a life fully inhabited. It participates in all four lunar phases rather than having a single-phase emphasis — generating in the waxing, expressing at the full moon, integrating in the waning, and resting in the dark.

Maramataka is not one of the nine dimensions. It is the temporal thread that runs through all of them — the aho (binding cord) that connects the Pou and gives the whole structure rhythmic life.

The framework is guided by three foundational principles — Te Tūāpapa (the foundation): Tū Pūmau (consistency), Whai Hua (productivity), and Tū Maia (stability). These are not performance standards but orientations: a compass for sustainable practice rather than a checklist of achievements.

4. Te Ara Iwa: The Ninety-Day Path

4.1 The Name and What It Carries

Te Ara Iwa — the Path of Nine — is the ninety-day, nine-step wellness programme through which participants walk the full architecture of TPO. The name carries multiple layers of meaning held together without conflict.

Iwa is nine: the number of dimensions in TPO, the number of steps in the journey, and the structural foundation of the entire framework. Ara is path: a way forward, a route walked in

sequence. Iwa is also the middle name of the framework developer's mother — placing the programme within the living whakapapa of the people it emerged from. Te Ara Iwa is simultaneously architectural, ancestral, and directional.

4.2 Te Hāerenga Tuatahi — The Founding Walk

Te Ara Iwa did not emerge from theoretical design. It emerged from embodied practice. In working through a personal proof of concept of the nine TPO steps — Te Hāerenga Tuatahi, the founding walk — the framework's developer committed to a concrete wellness practice: releasing alcohol from Monday to Friday across several moon cycles.

The early period was genuinely difficult. Urges were strong; the body resisted. Standard willpower-based frameworks would predict gradual improvement through consistent repetition — what Lally and colleagues (2010) found required an average of sixty-six days for habit formation in everyday contexts. But what occurred was different.

At the midpoint of the first moon cycle, as marama moved into the phase called Omutu, the urges eased. Not through increased effort, but through a qualitative shift in the body's relationship to the practice. Omutu is a time for fasting, detox, and retreat. The second cycle was manageable. By the third, the commitment had become natural.

This was not anecdotal noise. It was signal — and it pointed toward a structural insight about the relationship between natural rhythms and personal change processes.

4.3 The Mawharu Insight

Sitting with this experience and returning to the Maramataka, the alignment became clear. The nine steps of TPO begin with Te Ohore — awareness, awakening, the first stirring of change. In the Maramataka, Mawharu is the first night of the waxing phase: the moon beginning its movement toward fullness. Growth energy. Emerging energy. The natural resonance between beginning and waxing was exact.

From Mawharu, the logic of the rest of the programme followed. Each step found its natural Maramataka home. Reflective pauses fell where the lunar calendar invited reflection. Intensification phases aligned with building energy. Release work aligned with waning. Rest and integration aligned with the new moon.

When the full cycle was mapped, it took three complete moon cycles — approximately ninety days — to walk the nine steps to integration. The result was a programme architecture with a structural logic grounded not in arbitrary programme design but in Te Ao Mārama: the natural world.

This resonates with broader research on the time required for meaningful personal change. Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983) transtheoretical model identified change as a staged, cyclical process — not linear, and not rapid. The ninety-day timeframe aligns with what both indigenous and Western evidence suggest: that lasting change requires multiple cycles of practice, reflection, and integration.

4.4 Ngā Ara Toru — The Three Rhythms

A practical question emerged from this design: what happens when a person arrives mid-cycle? Must they wait for the next Mawharu?

The answer reshaped the architecture. What matters is not synchronisation with a single shared starting point but ensuring that each person begins at their own Mawharu — the next waxing moon that arrives for them. From this came Ngā Ara Toru: the Three Rhythms.

At any point in time, three separate cohorts move through Te Ara Iwa simultaneously, each beginning at a different Mawharu but following the same structural sequence. The rhythms run alongside each other — distinct journeys on the same Maramataka thread. The programme becomes continuous, alive, and accessible to participants at any point in the lunar cycle.

Te Ara Iwa begins at Mawharu and completes at Huna — three full moon cycles. It is not a course with a start date. It is a living rhythm.

5. The Four Phases and Their TPO Alignments

The Maramataka structures the lunar month — approximately 29.5 days — into a sequence of named nights, each carrying specific guidance for activity. These are commonly grouped into four principal phases, each with distinct energetic character and practical alignment across TPO's nine dimensions.

5.1 Te Marama Tupu — The Waxing Moon

The waxing moon begins after the new moon and is marked by increasing light and a building sense of energy. In traditional Māori practice, this phase was considered favourable for planting, since the moon's growing gravitational pull was understood to draw moisture upward through the soil — a principle supported by biodynamic agricultural research (Thun, 2003). More broadly, the waxing moon is a time of expansion, creativity, and new beginnings.

Within TPO, this phase is the prime window for Taha Tinana (physical wellness), where training loads can be increased and new health practices initiated. It is equally the natural activation phase for Taha Pūtea (financial wellness), where new income-generating activity, financial planning, and economic decision-making find their most energised ground. Taha Matihiko (digital wellness) responds to the waxing phase's forward momentum — launching platforms, engaging new digital communities, building digital skills. Taha Auaha (creative wellness) generates its new material here: the generative impulse is strongest in the waxing.

5.2 Te Marama Kaha — The Full Moon

The full moon — Te Rākaunui — marks the peak of the lunar cycle: a time of high energy, full illumination, and community gathering. Traditionally, this was the time for large communal activities including harvest, ceremony, and the sharing of knowledge across hapū. The extended visibility of the night also supported navigation, fishing, and travel.

Within TPO, the full moon is the natural home of Taha Whakapapa (relational wellbeing) — the dimension that asks kaiārahi and participants alike to show up for their people and receive them in return. It is also the moment when Taha Tuakiri comes alive in community: identity is not only an inner experience but is confirmed and celebrated in the presence of those who know one's name and lineage. Taha Auaha moves into expression at the full moon — the creative work generated in the waxing phase is shared, performed, made visible.

5.3 Te Marama Hinga — The Waning Moon

As lunar energy diminishes, the Maramataka guides a corresponding shift in human activity toward consolidation, reflection, and healing. Named in reference to Tangaroa, the atua of the sea and fish, this phase was traditionally associated with productive fishing conditions — an observation supported by contemporary marine biology research on tidal behaviour and fish feeding patterns (Tollefsen et al., 2000).

Within TPO, the waning moon is the therapeutic window par excellence: the natural rhythm for Taha Hinengaro (mental and emotional wellness). The observation within TPO practice is that emotional processing, integration work, and therapeutic disclosure tend to emerge with greater ease during this phase. This aligns with stress-recovery models in health psychology (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Taha Wairua (spiritual wellness) also deepens during the waning phase — prayer, ancestral connection, and contemplative practice find their most receptive ground. For Taha Auaha, this is the phase of refinement: the creative work of the waxing and full phases is consolidated, edited, and completed.

5.4 Te Marama Mate — The Dark Moon

The dark moon — Ōmutu — is perhaps the most spiritually significant phase in the Maramataka. It is associated with tapu (sacredness and restriction), quiet preparation, and the stillness that precedes renewal. Traditionally, this was a time for spiritual practice, internal reflection, and attending to matters of whakapapa. Physical activity was discouraged; the focus turned inward toward clearing what was no longer needed and preparing for the cycle to begin again.

Within TPO, the dark moon holds distinctive significance. It is the phase designated for Taha Wairua and Taha Tuakiri in their most interior forms — the inner whakapapa work that asks kaiārahi and participants to sit with the question of who they are beneath the identities accumulated through lived experience. It is also a Taha Kai moment: the body's natural fasting window, framed by the Maramataka long before contemporary literature on intermittent fasting validated it (Hyman, 2006). Within TPO practice, the dark moon is the recommended phase for kaiārahi review — the deliberate pause in which the previous cycle settles before the next begins.

6. The Māra Metaphor: Te Ara Iwa and Te Ngāhau Kiri

Within TPO, the relationship between the programme's two major clinical offerings is understood through the metaphor of the māra — the garden.

Te Ngāhau Kiri (Dimensional Autophagy) is the name given to the deeper metabolisation programme within TPO. Its name means the shedding of the skin: a precise image of what happens when layers accumulated through colonisation, exile, intergenerational trauma, and identity displacement begin to be released. Like breaking up compacted soil — soil that has been packed down by decades of suppression and disconnection — Te Ngāhau Kiri prepares the ground for new growth. It is the heavy-lifting work of clearing.

Te Ara Iwa is what follows: the seasonal tending, the new planting, once the māra can receive it. Where Te Ngāhau Kiri metabolises and releases, Te Ara Iwa realigns and renews. Both are necessary. The māra metaphor holds them in their proper sequence without collapsing the distinction.

For some participants entering TPO, Te Ara Iwa will be the natural point of entry — the Maramataka-aligned ninety-day journey of realignment and intentional planting across nine dimensions. For others, particularly those carrying the deeper wounds of colonisation PTSD, the triple exile, or significant intergenerational disruption, Te Ngāhau Kiri may be the necessary first ground — the breaking up of compacted soil before Te Ara Iwa can take root and flourish.

7. Clinical and Programme Implications

The integration of Maramataka into programme design has several implications for kaiārahi working within TPO and, more broadly, for kaupapa Māori health and wellness practice.

First, it requires kaiārahi to develop temporal literacy: familiarity with the Maramataka, its phases, and its named nights. This is not specialised or esoteric knowledge — Mātāmua's (2017) work has made Maramataka accessible to a general audience — but it does require ongoing engagement, ideally within a community of practice.

Second, it reframes the clinical relationship to client readiness. Rather than asking “is this client ready to change?” in the abstract, the TPO kaiārahi may also ask “what phase are we in, and what does this phase call for?” This shifts the burden of readiness from the individual to the relational ecology of person, kaiārahi, and natural rhythm.

Third, it has implications for programme evaluation. Outcomes measured without reference to lunar phase may obscure real effects. A person undertaking a difficult release practice during a waxing moon will likely have a different experience than one undertaking the same practice during a waning moon — and that difference is meaningful, not noise.

Finally, the Three Rhythms structure has implications for programme accessibility. Because participants begin at their own Mawharu, there is no fixed enrolment window. The programme is continuously available, continuously alive — which is itself a departure from the cohort model that characterises most formal wellness and therapeutic programmes.

8. Discussion

Marsden (2003) wrote that the Māori worldview understands time not as a container for events but as a living presence: te kore (the void), te pō (the dark), te ao (the light) — movement, not measurement. Maramataka is the practical expression of that understanding. It is time as intelligence, not time as logistics.

To integrate this into a wellness framework is to take seriously what decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2012) have long argued: that indigenous knowledge systems are not pre-scientific approximations of Western frameworks but sophisticated epistemologies. Te Ara Iwa is not a Māori version of a standard behaviour change programme. It is a programme architecture that could only have been conceived within a Maramataka understanding of time.

It is worth noting what this is not claiming. TPO is not asserting that the lunar cycle causes changes in human behaviour in a mechanistic sense. The literature on lunar influence on human physiology and psychology is contested (Raison, Klein, & Steckler, 1999). What TPO is claiming is more modest and, in some ways, more profound: that moving in alignment with a natural rhythm changes the quality of one's relationship to a practice. The moon becomes a companion in the work, not a control variable.

This is consistent with the somatic and relational understandings of change that underpin kaupapa Māori healing practice. When the framework developer describes the urge to drink easing as marama moved into Ōmutu, this is not superstition. It is an account of a body in relationship — with itself, with the natural world, and with the wisdom embedded in the Maramataka.

That is what Yellow Bird (2012) means by neurodecolonisation: the recovery of indigenous ways of knowing as resources for healing, including healing from the neurological and somatic effects of colonisation. To restore the Maramataka to its role in daily life — and specifically, to health and wellness practice — is to restore a navigational system that was never merely cultural. It was always also clinical.

9. Conclusion

Te Ara Iwa — the Path of Nine — is not a calendar trick. It is the expression of a fundamental orientation: that healing happens in time, and that time is not neutral. The Maramataka offers a temporal intelligence that Western programme design has long lacked — a map of when to grow, when to illuminate, when to release, and when to rest.

Te Poutama Ora integrates this intelligence not as cultural decoration but as structural foundation. The mapping of the nine dimensions across the four lunar phases — waxing, full, waning, dark — offers kaiārahi a principled and practically navigable guide to temporally sequenced wellness support that is both culturally grounded and increasingly supported by chronobiological, psychological, and ecological research.

For many participants, Te Ara Iwa will be the natural entry into this work: a ninety-day journey of realignment, new planting, and the practice of living in rhythm. For those whose ground requires deeper preparation first, Te Ngāhau Kiri — the shedding of the skin — offers the metabolisation and release that makes the planting possible.

When I am tau — when I am settled and in rhythm — te Ao Mārama is tau. The world of light reflects the peace within.

As TPO continues to develop and its application across community, clinical, and educational contexts grows, the integration of Maramataka into therapeutic infrastructure offers a model not only for Māori wellness but for any framework that takes seriously the relationship between natural rhythm and human flourishing.

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