

Maramataka as Therapeutic Infrastructure:

The 90-Day Engine in Te Poutama o te Ora

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Abstract

This article examines the integration of te Maramataka — the Māori lunar calendar — as the temporal spine of Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO), a nine-dimensional kaupapa Māori wellness framework. Drawing on the lived experience of the framework's developer, the article traces the origin of the TPO 90-Day Engine: a programme architecture in which participants complete the nine-step wellness journey across three complete lunar cycles, beginning at the Mawharu phase. The article introduces the concept of Maramataka as therapeutic infrastructure — the idea that indigenous temporal systems are not merely cultural context but active clinical tools. It presents Te Aho Maramataka, a practitioner navigation guide mapping each TPO wellness dimension to its optimal lunar phase engagement. The article argues that by aligning personal change processes with natural rhythms, TPO offers a decolonised, somatically grounded alternative to Western linear programme models. Implications for practitioners, supervisors, and programme designers are discussed.

Keywords: *Maramataka, Te Poutama o te Ora, kaupapa Māori, wellness, indigenous health, lunar rhythm, 90-day programme, therapeutic infrastructure*

1. Introduction

When Mason Durie (1994) introduced Te Whare Tapa Whā, he shifted Aotearoa New Zealand's health conversation permanently. 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 o te 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 purpose (Taha Tuakiri) through to creative wellness (Taha Auaha), with Taha Tuakiri at the centre as the anchor of all growth.

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. 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 12-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 therapeutic infrastructure** 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. Kaupapa Māori Wellness Frameworks: A Brief Positioning

TPO sits within a wider landscape of indigenous health frameworks developed in Aotearoa over the past four decades. Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985, 1994) remains the foundational reference point. Te Pae Māhutonga (Durie, 1999) extended this to population-level health promotion. The Meihana Model (Pitama et al., 2007) applied kaupapa Māori principles specifically to clinical assessment.

What these frameworks share is a commitment to the principle articulated by Smith (1999, p. 39): that research and practice with Māori must begin from Māori worldviews, using Māori concepts, not as translation of Western constructs but as primary frames of reference. They also share, to varying degrees, a concern with the structural causes of Māori health inequity — colonisation, land loss, cultural disruption, and the severing of intergenerational knowledge transmission (Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002; Reid & Robson, 2007).

TPO inherits this commitment. But it makes one additional move: it argues that to restore Māori wellness, we must restore not only Māori concepts of health but Māori concepts of *time*. Colonisation did not only damage Māori bodies, relationships, and spirituality. It replaced an indigenous temporal intelligence — Maramataka — with the Gregorian calendar and its implicit assumptions about linear progress. TPO's integration of Maramataka is, in this sense, an act of temporal decolonisation.

4. Te Poutama o te Ora: Framework Overview

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

Taha Tuakiri — Identity and Purpose (the central Pou)

Taha Whakapapa — Relational Wellbeing

Taha Hinengaro — Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

Taha Wairua — Spiritual Wellbeing

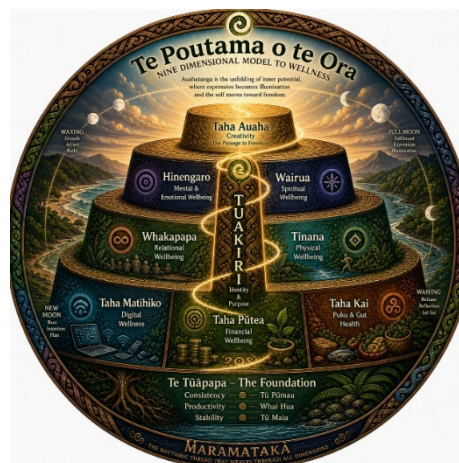
Taha Tinana — Physical Wellbeing

Taha Matihiko — Digital Wellness

Taha Kai — Puku and Gut Health

Taha Pūtea — Financial Wellbeing

Taha Auaha — Creative Wellness



Each dimension is understood not as a standalone category but as a Pou within a larger wharenui: 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.

The framework is guided by three foundational principles — Te Tūāpapa (the foundation): Te Pūmau (consistency), Whai Hua (productivity), and Te Maia (stability). These are not

performance standards but orientations: a compass for sustainable practice rather than a checklist of achievements.

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.

5. The 90-Day Engine: Origin, Design, and Rationale

5.1 Te Hāerenga Tuatahi — The Founding Walk

The 90-Day Engine 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 of this commitment was genuinely difficult. Urges were strong; the body resisted. Standard willpower-based frameworks would predict that the experience would improve gradually through consistent repetition — what Lally and colleagues (2010) found required an average of 66 days for habit formation in everyday contexts. But what actually occurred was different.

At the midpoint of the first moon cycle, as marama (the moon) 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 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.

5.2 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 finding 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 90-day timeframe aligns with what both indigenous and Western evidence suggest: that lasting change requires multiple cycles of practice, reflection, and integration.

5.3 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, it became clear, 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 the TPO programme 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.

The 90-Day Engine 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.

6. Te Aho Maramataka: Dimensions and Lunar Phase

From the 90-Day Engine emerged a second tool: Te Aho Maramataka — a practitioner navigation guide mapping each of the nine TPO dimensions to the four primary phases of the lunar month.

The four phases and their energetic signatures within the TPO framework are:

☀️ **Waxing (Te Tāheke ā-Marama)** Growth, action, building — the phase of becoming. Best used for new practices, expanding capacity, setting intentions into motion.

☽️ **Full Moon (Te Ōtanga)** Fulfilment, expression, illumination — the phase of full presence. Best used for celebration, sharing, seeing clearly what has been built.

🌑 **Waning (Te Heke ā-Marama)** Release, reflection, letting go — the phase of clearing. Best used for releasing what no longer serves, processing grief, and honest self-review.

🌒 **New Moon (Te Kōpura)** Rest, intention, stillness — the phase of return. Best used for deep rest, quiet planning, and receiving rather than doing.

Across all nine dimensions, Te Aho Maramataka maps a reflective question for each phase — not a prescription, but an orientation. For example, in Taha Tuakiri (Identity and Purpose): the waxing moon invites growing into one's whakapapa gifts; the full moon illuminates one's standing place and lineage; the waning moon invites releasing colonial

masks and borrowed selves; the new moon offers rest in the knowledge that one belongs before achieving anything.

This is not a therapeutic protocol in the Western clinical sense. It is a navigation compass: a practitioner tool that brings temporal intelligence into the room alongside clinical skill.

7. Clinical and Programme Implications

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

First, it requires practitioners to develop **temporal literacy**: familiarity with the Maramataka, its phases, and its named nights. This is not a 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 practitioner 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, practitioner, 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, 1999) have long argued: that indigenous knowledge systems are not pre-scientific approximations of Western frameworks but sophisticated epistemologies in their own right. The 90-Day Engine 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 Omutu, 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 o te 90 Rā — the 90-Day Engine — 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 o te Ora integrates this intelligence not as cultural decoration but as structural foundation. Te Aho Maramataka — the tool that maps the nine wellness dimensions to the four lunar phases — is, in this sense, both a practical navigation guide and an epistemological statement: that indigenous temporal systems have something irreplaceable to offer the healing work of our time.

Maramataka — the rhythmic thread that weaves through all dimensions.

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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