KO TŌKU INGOA KO RIPEKA - MY NAME IS RIPEKA

Waikaremoana Waitoki

He timatatanga: This book is organised around Ripeka and her family's story. The events described in her story reflect the lives of several wāhine, tāne, rangatahi and tamariki who have been involved in psychological services. In researching Ripeka's story, I spoke with several senior Māori psychologists and asked them to describe the type of clients they worked with. The case study about Ripeka, was in my view very real, even with the complex interweaving; but I needed reassurance that the case was not an imaginary assimilation of experiences. We all agreed that Ripeka's story reveals the lived reality of many of our clients who have faced multiple challenges and overwhelming heartache. Ripeka's ability to live well was challenged throughout her life, yet she drew on her whānau to support her and when times were good, she flourished. Living well for Ripeka and her whānau would have been more difficult had she not been able to draw on her cultural heritage for support.

Ripeka's story is our story – she, and those who have contributed to the lives of Matiu, Waiora, Piata, Tai, Sam and Nan is why many of us work as psychologists. Some of the kaituhi (author) rejected the APA referencing style, with good reason. Practitioners do not need to keep up to date with a clunky, profit-driven style - working with clients is more important. Each kaituhi wrote about Ripeka or her whānau according to their experience. Naturally, this means that Ripeka is portrayed as either Ngāti Maniapoto, or she is Kai Tahu; it depends on who is talking. The benefit for us is that we get to glimpse the variety of iwi and hapū that make us who we are, uniquely Māori.

WAIKAREMOANA

I was working as a clinical psychologist in a mental health service and part of my role was to do urgent assessments for inpatient clients. I received a request to assess a woman who specifically wanted to work with a female, Māori psychologist. At that time, I was the only person who fit that description in the region. I read her file and was appalled, fascinated, and apprehensive. The admission notes said that Ripeka had been picked up overnight by the Crisis Assessment Team (CAT) and that she had barely slept for over two weeks. She had been taken to hospital in a state of extreme agitation, she was verbally abusive and she had hit a staff member. Ripeka was placed in a Limited Stimulus Area (LSA) where she settled within 10 minutes.

The attending psychiatrist noted that Ripeka was wearing a combination of colours which he deemed "inappropriate" and that she had symbols in red and black vivid on her body. The psychiatrist described her as violent, paranoid, and delusional because she said she often talked to her grandmother who had passed away 6 years earlier, and because she had been found sleeping on her grave. The psychiatrist also said that Ripeka was convinced her gang-related neighbours were out to get her and that she was fixated on her brother's conversion to a religion that did not support Māori culture. Ripeka was diagnosed with Bipolar Affective Disorder, possible Delusional Disorder, questions of paranoid schizophrenia and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I met with Ripeka a few weeks after her release from hospital.

Ripeka is a 46 year-old beautiful, Māori woman. She was cautious, suspicious, hopeful, and she was struggling. With her husband Matiu, they have a 23-year old daughter (Te Waiora), two sons aged 16 and 14 (Tai and Piata) and a 6-year old granddaughter (Aria). Ripeka also lost a child to cot death when he was 3 months old. I wondered if the psychiatrist had read her earlier file as she had a history of trauma.

The psychiatrist said she was delusional and paranoid because of her choice of clothing, the symbols on her body, paranoid thinking, talking to her grandmother and her attempts to exorcise her dreams. In her discussions with me, Ripeka said she chose colours particular to Māori of red, black and white; the symbols were for her protection. Ripeka said that she had tried every day for a week to get the crisis team to see her but no-one would talk to her; they told her to wait until she got worse.

In childhood Ripeka had experienced recurrent sexual abuse by her older cousin who visited during the Christmas holidays. She said that the abuse stopped when she told her grandmother and her cousin was not allowed to visit their home. As an 18 year-old, she experienced a horrific gang-rape. Of the rape, she only remembers the beginning and then waking up in a mental health hospital days later with injuries to her body. The diagnosis of PTSD suggested that some attention was paid to her past experiences, but not enough. How could he understand a story about an abused Māori girl who grew to become an abused Māori woman?

Ripeka's Story - Ripeka

I didn't have the energy to attend rape counselling services. I was scared, tired and, I didn't trust anyone. I didn't know anyone either. I decided to move in with my Nanny Waiti out the back of Awakino, where my marae is. I gave up my job because I couldn't work anymore. I couldn't do anything, couldn't shower, eat; talk to anyone. I didn't have any money when I stayed with my Nan. I wouldn't say I was unemployed because I worked for my Nan. She gave me money for cigarettes. She said she would help me to get well, but I had to help her on the marae. I did little things at first, cleaning up her house, cooking meals, doing the washing. Then eventually I started helping her on the marae. I helped her in the kitchen when there was a tangi or whānau hui or I'd tidy the gardens and connect with Papatūānuku. I didn't talk to anyone but my Nan.

After about 6 months my Nan asked me to help with the marae budgets and to do the catering for iwi meetings. By the end of the year, I was taking minutes at the meetings and driving my Nan everywhere. My job, she said, was to make sure I knew what was happening with the whānau, the marae, the hapū and the iwi. That's what she reckoned anyway; in that order. I loved my Nan. She didn't push anything on to me – she knew I still suffered, especially when I was with too many people – so she would give me a little job to do to take my mind of the pressure. If I didn't have her, I don't know what I would have done. I know I wouldn't be interested in what happened on the marae like I am now. She made sure there was a space for us to come home to. That's important I can see that now. Even though mum and dad tried to show us kids when we were growing up, none of us wanted to know.

My husband Matiu? I met him during a family reunion on the marae when I was 20. He was my cousin's friend who had come to a whānau reunion but he isn't related. He came to the marae all the time even though he wasn't even related to us (laughs), but my Nan knew his whānau and said he was a good boy – and that I should stop ignoring him. When I asked her what she meant she said "That boy is only here to see you. Why else has he been here every weekend since the reunion?" I guess I noticed him after that. We got married 2 years later.

Matiu

I fell for Ripeka from the moment I first saw her. She did everything for her grandmother and I saw that she worked really hard to make sure the old people were comfortable. She didn't even notice me but I knew I was going to marry her (Ripeka laughs). It took months with me hanging around the marae in the weekends looking for little jobs to do. I'd always asked Nanny Waiti if there was anything I could do around the marae. I'd go eeling or fishing, chop wood, anything that got me close to Ripeka. When she finally noticed me, well…Ripeka is the love of my life. I will do anything for her. With her getting sick over the years, no-one has ever asked me what I think; this is the first time. I just want to help her and our kids. I do the best I can, but I feel like I keep letting her down.

Ripeka

Te Waiora was born when I was 23. Having baby, being married and living with Nan was the happiest time of my life. I visited marae with Nan. Matiu had a good job at the power station and I had friends who would come over with their kids. I also started working part-time as an office temp at the Iwi Trust Board – nothing too much, just a day here and there. After a few years I moved into town but I always came home to be with Nan in the weekends and during school holidays. Then I had Tai and Piata; both haututu boys. They are so amazing. They do the most random things sometimes but my Nan gets them, so does Matiu. I just see haututu boys, but I love them. Te Waiora cares for them when I get sick.

When I was 38, Nan got diagnosed with cancer. It was so sudden – she was sick for a while which we all thought was the flu and then when she eventually went to hospital the tests they did showed she had cancer. The doctors said she had a year left but she stayed with us for two years. Matiu and I looked after her until she died. It was the saddest thing to let her go, but she said she was happy because I had stayed with her and brought in the next generation – that's how she saw it.

Although I suffered for a little while when Nan died, I think I was ok. I guess it was the spiritual messages I keep hearing on the marae – like during her tangi, I was sitting outside the wharekai at night and I could hear someone doing a whaikōrero on the marae atea, or close to it anyway. I didn't really pay attention at first because I guess I was thinking about what I was going to do now that Nan had gone. When I realised that someone was talking I started to listen, but I didn't speak Māori then – I didn't know what he was saying. There wasn't anyone on the marae – just me. I talked to a kuia about what happened and she told me that I had to learn Māori. That was the message.

Within a year of Nan dying I had another baby. He only lived for 3 months – he died of cot death; so they say. We buried him on top of Nan. Matiu and I nearly split up because we couldn't talk to each other anymore. We couldn't talk about pepi. I just didn't feel like I could talk to anyone. I knew Matiu was struggling too but I just didn't see it at the time. Anyway, I gave up studying and my part-time job but it made our situation harder because at the same time Matiu's hours got cut back. We didn't have enough to buy food and sometimes I didn't eat so that I could feed everyone.

I think I became depressed; I had to get help from my GP. He put me on medication which I don't think worked for me. You know, with medication, it made things worse for me, it was like I couldn't settle and I wanted to do everything. I thought I was crazy. I had a big fight with Matiu one night and I ended up being admitted to hospital after I was found sitting next to my Nan's grave talking to her. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder but I'm not sure why, not really. Someone called CYFS and they tried to take our kids away from us because they didn't think Matiu and I could look after them. It could have been the school because Piata was taking off from school all the time to come home and he wouldn't listen to the teachers. They knew I had just lost my baby and was struggling to look after myself and the kids but they didn't care - if it wasn't for my parents CYFS would have taken my kids. Having CYFS in your life is the worst thing; it made me want to get well.

The GP gave me a different dose of medication but it made me feel tired all the time and I felt like I was inside a bubble looking out at the world. Even though it still hurt to get up every day and look after the kids I thought I'd try going back to work so I asked the Iwi Health Service if I could work part-time. I got better over the year and Matiu got better hours at work; I even went back to studying. I helped to set up a Māori consumer advisory service.

The organisation was so good; the service is kaupapa Māori. When whānau go there they just get treated better than if they went into the mainstream service; it really has to be by Māori for Māori. Te Waiora, my daughter had to get help from them. She was in a relationship that started really well but then Sam, her partner, started hitting her after Aria was born. He's a drinker and for a while, before Aria was born, he dragged my daughter into it, but she is ok now. Sam needs help though. Matiu and I and the boys are looking after Aria while Te Waiora and Sam sort themselves out.

This last admission though I think that was the worst. I knew I was getting unwell because there was just so much going on that was pulling me down. I tried so hard to get help but no-one would listen. I had spent weeks several weeks travelling to marae to get our people to vote on how they wanted the Iwi Trust Board to represent them on a Treaty Claim. There was a lot to sort out within our iwi and the media were having a field day dragging Māori into the dirt; it was all over the papers. Every day there was something negative about Māori. I wasn't sleeping and I would drink heaps of LiftPlus to stay awake. I couldn't stay away from the politics; what would my Nan have said?

Then a gang moved into my neighbour's house and I stopped letting my granddaughter play over there. My friend started giving me a hard time about that, but I wouldn't let Aria go there. I was so scared that they might see me; I couldn't even look at them. Then my friend starting seeing this guy, who, it turns out, is a sex offender. They both came to my house! I couldn't handle that and every time my friend wanted to meet up I'd find an excuse to stay away. She started to back-stab me to our other friends.

My son Tai was hurt playing league. He was concussed and knocked out for about 5 minutes. I was terrified that he was going to die. Matiu and I take turns looking after him because it was like he was knocked back to being a 10 year old. He can't go to school for a whole day just yet. He is still at home but he goes for an hour then he gets too tired and upset. Matiu did all the childcare when I was in hospital. Now I just worry that my family is falling apart because I can't hold it together.

When my Nan and pepi died my brother turned his back on us; he won't step foot onto a marae now. He joined a church and then started telling me not to teach my kids Māori and that it was a waste of time. I don't understand what happened to him. He lived with my dad's parents for years so he speaks Māori and he knew that he was supposed to take over on the marae when dad died, but he just walked away. Dad is one of the kaumātua who does the whaikōrero on the marae; my brother was meant to take over from him. My parents were so hurt. I can't understand why he won't have anything to do with us anymore. I feel like my brother is persecuting me for wanting to be Māori.

You know, looking at it now, why would the psychiatrist think I was crazy? Am I really bipolar? Can I 'be' a psychiatric disorder? I learned about these things when I helped set up the mental health unit for our Iwi Trust Board. I know my triggers and I know what went wrong in my life. I just need help to be a parent; I just want to heal my family.

WAIKAREMOANA

Ripeka highlights the importance of cultural awareness, knowledge and skill for Māori. Her life-story featured episodes of abuse from friends, family, and the mental health system. She should have been helped when she was first admitted to hospital. Why was she left to suffer on her own for so many years? My review of her case notes found repeated instances of institutional racism that so often disadvantage Māori. Worse, those abuses had prevented her from reaching her full potential.

Years later I prepared a PowerPoint presentation about Ripeka for a training programme. My 10 year old daughter happened to read the details about the colours that Ripeka wore. She commented: "Those are the colours of Waikato Māori. Why is she doing that?" Why was Ripeka's attempt to manage her distress obvious to my daughter, but not to anyone else in the mental health system? All those professionals, all that training...

Would a good cultural formulation framework have identified the impact of culture on Ripeka? Will training this generation of psychologists in to work with Māori prevent future abuses of other Ripeka? Whenever I do that work, I talk about Ripeka. Her story provides the backdrop to consider why Te Tiriti/The Treaty, language and socio-political histories and issues are relevant and why knowledge about Māori iwi, hapu and family structures is important.

Students or psychologists ask: "what is the point of knowing about socio-political histories?" When that happens, I point to Ripeka's experiences. She reminds me that Māori have different ways of thinking and behaving and that if psychologists really understand Māori worldviews, they can be positive change agents. Psychology as a profession has to step outside its cultural tower and look at alternative Māori explanations and possibilities.

My experience with Ripeka was not unusual as it reflected a challenge that many Māori as psychologists or consumers face. Students still talk about their struggle in psychology, dreaming of the day when they can be free to be Māori and to think and work as Māori. Those struggles sometimes find a way into our everyday lives as psychologists. While I was on a routine visit to a client in prison, I came across a significant and impressive Māori carving in the meal room. I read the name of the carver and felt a more powerful pain as I recognised the name of the man who had brutally murdered a friend of mine. He was in jail for that all-too-common-crime against women. I read his name aloud. My supervisor at the time, without knowing my whakapapa, commented: "if you are Māori with that surname, it is highly likely that you are going to end up in prison". I calmly replied: "That is my mother's maiden name" – the implication in my words were that with "that surname", I was not in prison as a prisoner, but as a healer. Someone, not from my whakapapa, iwi, hapū, or whānau, had just told me how my life and the lives of Māori with "that surname" was going to play out.

Listening to him, it was as though there was no potential in Māori lives. Was it because of the name? Was it the stereotype that Māori offenders, or at least recidivist offenders, are hopeless cases, immune to the social, political and economic forces that create the backstory to their lives as the forever-in-prison statistics? I also wondered how that might feel to whānau who could undoubtedly sense that the person charged with helping them may not have believed in their ability to walk different paths. The mistrust that Indigenous peoples have towards psychiatric diagnosis is entirely understandable given our experiences with the mental health system and the revolving-door of misdiagnosis, under-diagnosis, and less than optimal treatment options. While there have been instances of exceptionally good outcomes for us, there is often limited analysis of the nuances of Māori realities, experiences and reactions to everyday life events.

Ripeka may be seen as complex, but her backstory of multiple instances of unmet need is not unique. Was Ripeka simply another Māori with 'that surname'? Psychology training in Aotearoa, and internationally, barely touches on the details of Indigenous aspirations, focusing instead on deficit models of Indigenous mental and physical health and wellbeing. By keeping the focus on our perceived deficits, we, as healers, miss the opportunity to consider building our own knowledge systems. How might we as Indigenous psychologists and Indigenous health workers support whānau like Ripeka? Do we have the means to revitalise and reinvent our mātauranga Māori that is rich with psychological knowledge? Do we need to take a deep look at what we are learning in mainstream psychology so that we can see where we might be out of step with a Māori worldview?

Ripeka's story is a message of hope. If she can believe, so can all of us.