

Pūrākau, Death, and Assisted Dying: A Māori Framework for Understanding End-of-Life

Te Hurinui Karaka-Clarke, Claire Robertshaw, & Awhi Clarke

Article Info

Keywords

Pūrākau
Assisted Dying
Tikanga Māori
Māori Cosmology
End-of-Life Ethics
Mana Motuhake
Wairua
Whakapapa
Relational Autonomy

Abstract

This conceptual article addresses several critical gaps in Indigenous health literature by exploring the ethical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of assisted dying through the lens of Māori cosmology and pūrākau (ancestral narratives). While existing end-of-life policy frameworks often prioritize Western bioethical principles, this article argues for the inclusion of Kaupapa Māori principles such as whakapapa, wairua, mana motuhake, and tapu/noa as essential components of culturally resonant care. Drawing upon foundational narratives including the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, the creation of Hineahuone, the transformation of Hinetītama into Hinenuitēpō, and the fatal attempt of Māui to conquer death, we position pūrākau as dynamic ethical texts that guide decision-making. This article contributes to Indigenous health discourse by offering a whānau-centred, tikanga-informed critique of the End-of-Life Choice Act 2019 and calls for broader recognition of spiritual and relational dimensions in end-of-life care. We contend that assisted dying, when undertaken with whānau engagement, spiritual awareness, and cultural integrity, may be ethically compatible with tikanga Māori (Māori cultural practices).

Author Info

Te Hurinui Karaka-Clarke, Dr. Associate Professor of Mātauranga Māori, University of Waikato
Email: tehurinui.karaka-clarke@waikato.ac.nz

Claire Robertshaw, Deputy Principal, Taniwharau: Fraser High School

Awhi Clarke, Lecturer, University of Canterbury

©2025 The Authors. This is an open-access article under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

He karakia timatanga	An opening spiritual chant
Ko te Pū	The source, the origin
Ko te More	The shoot
Ko te Weu	The root fibre
Ko te Aka	The vine
Ko te Rea	The growth
Ko te Wao-nui	The great forest
Ko te Kune	Growth
Ko te Whē	Insects
Ko te Kore	The great void
Ko te Pō	The great darkness
Ko Rangī rāua ko Papa	The Sky Father and Earth Mother
Ko ngā Atua	The deities
Ko te Ao Mārama	The world of light

An explanation:

This karakia traces the genesis of knowledge and being, from the void to enlightenment. It is often used at the beginning of wānanga or in formal settings to acknowledge the tapu (sanctity) of knowledge and to prepare participants mentally and spiritually. The knowledge shared in this article deals with mate (death), which sits in the realm of tapu; hence, it is appropriate to begin this article with this karakia.

Introduction

Titiro whakamuri, kia anga whakamua—Look back to move forward. This whakataukī (proverb) aptly frames the intentions of this conceptual article, which addresses multiple gaps in Indigenous health literature surrounding assisted dying. Existing discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand is largely dominated by Western bioethical principles and biomedical frameworks, which often fail to consider the cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions that underpin Māori understandings of death and dying (Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2023, Gott et al., 2016). Moreover, the integration of Indigenous ethical knowledge, particularly through pūrākau (oral narrative), remains under-theorized in health literature. This article seeks to respond to these gaps by offering a Kaupapa Māori framework that centres relational ethics, whakapapa (genealogy), and wairua (spiritual integrity).

This conceptual analysis draws on four interwoven pūrākau: the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, the creation of Hineahuone, the transformation of Hinetītama into Hinenuitēpō, and the death of Māui. Through these pūrākau, we examine how Māori cosmology provides an ethical compass for navigating the complex terrain of assisted dying. Pūrākau are not simply myths or stories; they are repositories of Indigenous knowledge, values, and ethics. As such, they serve as powerful analytical and spiritual tools for understanding and reimagining end-of-life care within Indigenous frameworks. This paper also contributes to the wider Indigenous health field by reframing death not merely as a clinical endpoint but as a culturally constructed, spiritually governed process. In doing so, we critically engage with the End-of-Life Choice Act 2019 (Ministry of Health, 2019), identifying how its focus on mana motuhake (individual autonomy) and legal thresholds often clashes with Māori

values of kotahitanga (collectivity), wairua, and whānau (extended family) engagement. By positioning assisted dying within te ao Māori, this article responds to a pressing need for Indigenous-led discourse on death and dying that is grounded in culturally specific cosmologies, ethics, and practices (Guedes et al., 2018). Furthermore, we argue that decisions surrounding assisted dying must be embedded within tikanga-informed processes, including karakia (spiritual incantation/prayer), whakawhanaungatanga (relationships), and kaitiakitanga (guardianship) to uphold mana motuhake and waiuatanga (spiritual well-being).

Ultimately, this article calls for a reorientation of assisted dying practices and policies to include Indigenous frameworks not as symbolic references but as essential, culturally legitimate systems of health knowledge and practice. In doing so, we contribute to a growing but still limited body of Indigenous literature that positions death and dying within relational, spiritual, and decolonizing paradigms.

Positionality

The following section contains personal reflections on grief and the death of a parent. Readers are advised that this material may be emotionally challenging. We include it here as part of a Kaupapa Māori approach that honours lived experience and wairua as valid sites of ethical inquiry.

On the 12th of May 2001, my mother passed away following a prolonged and painful struggle with cancer, a journey marked by considerable suffering and a loss of personal dignity. At the onset of her illness, she held significant responsibilities as the custodian of tikanga and kawa on our marae and was, throughout her life, a devout follower of the Catholic faith. In the years leading up to her death, I was privileged to share a number of intimate conversations with her, during which we discussed a broad range of topics. It was during one of these exchanges that she expressed a sentiment that profoundly unsettled me, saying: “Boy, if I had the opportunity, I would choose assisted dying.”

Her statement was deeply disconcerting. It disrupted my assumptions about her steadfast adherence to both Catholic doctrine and tikanga Māori. Throughout my upbringing, my parents and koroua had instilled in me a strong commitment to the Māori worldview concerning the tapu (sacredness) of the human body. I was taught that one should depart the world of the living in the same state in which one entered it, whole and unaltered. Within this framework, there were specific, culturally acceptable processes for dying, and assisted dying was unequivocally excluded. Moreover, I was aware that such an act would contravene the tenets of the Catholic Church, which further complicated my interpretation of her words.

In the years since her passing, I have engaged in extensive reflection and critical inquiry into the intersections between tikanga Māori, organ donations and assisted dying. This has included a re-examination of pūrākau, foundational Māori narratives about death, dying, and the afterlife. Nearly a quarter of a century later, my position has evolved. Through sustained engagement with these pūrākau (cultural texts) and frameworks, I have come to the view that, under certain circumstances, assisted dying may be interpreted as compatible with tikanga Māori. This perspective is informed by a deeper appreciation of Māori cosmology, which contains rich pūrākau that explore the origins of life, death, and the relational ethics that govern human behaviour.

In this article, we examine four interwoven pūrākau—the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, the creation of Hineahuone, the transformation of Hinētītama into Hinenuitēpō, and the death of Māui—to explore Māori understandings of death and its metaphysical significance. These are then critically compared with contemporary debates about assisted dying within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly through the lens of the End-of-Life Choice Act 2019. Our analysis is grounded in a Kaupapa Māori framework that centres whakapapa (genealogy), wairua

(spirituality), mana motuhake (autonomy), and whakawhanaungatanga (relational accountability).

Methodology

This article adopts a critical narrative autoethnographic approach situated within a Kaupapa Māori epistemological framework. Autoethnography, as both method and genre, enables researchers to draw upon their own lived experiences as sites of inquiry, often to challenge dominant cultural narratives and articulate insider perspectives (Ellis et al., 2011). In this context, autoethnography serves as a bridge between the personal and the political, the spiritual, and the structural, aligning closely with the intentions of this article, which seeks to reframe assisted dying through Māori cosmology, pūrākau, and tikanga.

The methodological foundation of this article arises from the author's personal journey navigating grief, spirituality, and cultural identity following the death of a loved one. This experience, while intimate, is not recounted as an isolated autobiography. Rather, it is positioned within a broader cultural and ethical landscape, where pūrākau are drawn upon not simply as mythic texts, but as epistemic and moral frameworks through which Māori have long understood death, agency, and relational accountability (Royal, 2003; Mahuika, 2012). This reflexive mode of inquiry aligns with what Anderson (2006) describes as analytic autoethnography, in which the researcher is both a visible participant and a critical theorist of their own cultural positioning.

The use of pūrākau as an ethical narrative is deliberate. These ancestral stories are not illustrative backdrops but are themselves ethical texts that guide decision-making and spiritual discernment. The integration of pūrākau with personal narrative exemplifies the principles of Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), where storytelling is employed as a method of theorizing, healing, and transmitting cultural values. Within a Kaupapa Māori context, this methodology affirms the importance of whakapapa, wairua, mana motuhake, and tikanga as both ontological and methodological foundations for knowledge production (Smith, 2012; Mead, 2003).

This autoethnographic orientation is also a response to the inadequacy of dominant Western bioethical frameworks to account for Indigenous worldviews on death and dying (Jenkinson, 2015; Haining et al., 2023). In recounting and analysing a personal experience through the lens of Māori cosmology, this article reclaims the right to theorize from within te ao Māori, affirming that personal narrative, when interwoven with pūrākau and tikanga, is a legitimate and powerful method of Indigenous health scholarship (Kovach, 2009).

In this way, the article contributes not only to Indigenous ethics but also to methodological innovation, demonstrating how Kaupapa Māori research can embrace personal narrative, ancestral story, and critical analysis as braided strands (ngā whenu) within a coherent and culturally resonant methodological approach.

Pūrākau 1: Ranginui and Papatūānuku

According to Māori oral traditions, the creation of the world began many millennia ago within the realm of Te Kore, a space often described as the void of limitless potential. Rather than a single, undifferentiated state, Te Kore is understood as comprising multiple generative stages. Among some iwi, these are articulated as Te Korekore (the realm of potential being; an absolute void teeming with possibility from which all things might emerge), Te Korekore tū i te Pō (the void standing in the darkness, signifying the emergence of latent energy), Te Korekore tū i te Ao (the void standing in the light, indicating the beginning of a shift from potential to form), and Te Korekore i takea mai i Te Kore (the void that arises from the void, suggesting the recursive unfolding of potential).

While the names and sequencing of these stages may vary across iwi, they collectively affirm that the cosmos began as a dynamic progression through states of possibility.

From Te Kore, the narrative transitions into Te Pō, often described as a series of epochs cloaked in darkness. These stages include Te Pō Nui (the great night), Te Pō Roa (the long night), Te Pō Uriuri (the deep darkness), Te Pō Tangotango (the intense darkness), and Te Pō-tahuri-mai-kite-ao (the night of turning toward the world of light). Each of these stages represents a gradual intensification and transformation, culminating in a stirring of movement and awareness, a shift from non-being toward being. It is from within these profound depths of darkness that Ranginui (the Sky Father) and Papatūānuku (the Earth Mother) emerged, marking the genesis of form, relationality, and life.

Following their emergence from Te Pō, Ranginui (the Sky Father) and Papatūānuku (the Earth Mother) remained locked in an enduring and intimate embrace, their bodies pressed so tightly together that no light could enter the space between them. From this sacred union, numerous children were born. They were divine entities or atua, each embodying a domain within the natural world. Among them were Tāne-māhuta (atua of forests and birds), Tangaroa (atua of the oceans), Tāwhirimātea (atua of wind and weather), Haumia-tiketike (atua of uncultivated vegetation), Rongo-mā-Tāne (atua of cultivated food and peace), and Tūmātauenga (atua of warfare and human activity).

Confined within the darkness of their parents' embrace, the offspring began to feel stifled. In the gloom they conferred, yearning for Te Ao Mārama (the world of light, understanding, and revelation). A council was convened to determine a course of action. Tāwhirimātea, valuing the sacred union of their parents, insisted that they should remain undisturbed. In contrast, Tūmātauenga advocated for a more radical solution: to slay their parents, thereby severing the bond that kept them in darkness. However, Tāne-māhuta proposed an alternative. Rather than destroy their parents, he suggested they be gently separated.

After his brothers' attempts failed, Tāne lay on his back, placed his powerful legs against the chest of Ranginui, and pushed upwards with immense strength. Gradually, the sky was separated from the earth, allowing light to flood into the world. Thus began the age of Te Ao Mārama, and with it, the foundations of existence as it is understood in te ao Māori. Ranginui, grieving the loss of his beloved, continues to weep, his tears descending as rain. Papatūānuku, in her own sorrow, responds with the rising of mist.

Not all accepted this outcome. Tāwhirimātea, overwhelmed by grief and anger, ascended to the heavens and unleashed his fury upon his siblings in the form of storms, tempests, and destructive winds. In response, most of the atua retreated to their respective domains: Tangaroa withdrew to the sea, and Tāne found refuge in the forest. The relentless assaults by Tāwhirimātea symbolized not only his disapproval but also the ongoing tensions between natural forces.

Only Tūmātauenga stood firm against the onslaught. Eventually, after an exhaustive struggle, a tenuous truce was reached. Yet Tūmātauenga, feeling betrayed by his brothers' unwillingness to stand with him, turned his disappointment into action. He asserted dominance over the realms of his siblings, fishing the descendants of Tangaroa, cultivating the children of Rongo and Haumia, and felling the trees of Tāne. Eventually, an uneasy peace endured between the siblings, and the next phase of the creation narrative begins with Tāne and Hineahuone.

Pūrākau 2: Hineahuone and Hinetītama

In the wake of creation, Tāne-māhuta sought a companion with whom he could share his existence. Unable to find a suitable partner among the other atua, he journeyed to Kurawaka, a sacred place imbued with creative potential, and shaped from its red ochre clay the form of the first woman.

This figure, imbued with wairua and mauri (spiritual essence), became known as Hineahuone (the Earth-formed Maiden). Once her body was complete, Tāne placed his mouth upon hers and breathed life into her, thus enacting the sacred act of ha ora, the breath of life. Tāne took Hineahuone as his wife, and together they brought forth a daughter named Hinetītama (the Dawn Maiden) whose very name evokes transition, illumination, and the liminal space between night and day.

Pūrākau 3: Hinetītama and Hinenuitēpō

As Hinetītama matured, she too became the consort of Tāne, unaware of their shared whakapapa. Over time, she began to question her origins, persistently asking Tāne the identity of her father. His reluctance to answer ultimately led her to the devastating realization that her husband was also her biological parent.

Overwhelmed by a profound sense of shame and betrayal, Hinetītama resolved to leave Te Ao Mārama (the world of light) and descend into Rarohenga (the spiritual realm of the dead). Before departing, Tāne pleaded with her to remain, but she refused, stating, “E noho koe i te ao, māku e tiaki te pō” or “You remain to care for the living, and I will care for them in death.” With these words, she withdrew from the world of light and transformed into Hinenuitēpō, the great female atua of night and death. In some traditions, a senior female spiritual being aided her in this transformation, guiding her through the metaphysical transition and affirming her role as guardian of the dead and custodian of balance between life and death. Aware of her role in the realm of death, Māui Pōtiki, also known by various names including Māui Tinihanga, resolved to use his demi-god attributes in an effort to secure immortality for humankind.

Pūrākau 4: Hinenuitēpō and Māui

In his final and most ambitious quest, Māui Pōtiki, trickster, cultural hero, and demi-god, sought to conquer death itself and grant immortality to humankind. Recognizing that death entered the world through the descent of Hinetītama into Rarohenga, where she became Hinenuitēpō, the atua (deity) of the underworld, Māui resolved to reverse this cosmic inevitability. His plan was to destroy Hinenuitēpō by entering her body through her birth canal and exiting through her mouth, thereby symbolically inverting the life cycle and defeating death at its source.

According to the pūrākau, Māui transformed himself into a small reptilian form to undertake this journey. He instructed his companion birds, including the tīrairaka (fantail), to remain silent so as not to alert Hinenuitēpō to his presence. However, as Māui entered the sleeping deity, the fantail, either out of fear, amusement, or irreverence, burst into laughter, awakening Hinenuitēpō. In that moment, she crushed Māui between the obsidian teeth located in her genitalia, ending his life and thereby affirming death as a permanent feature of the human condition.

Thematic Analysis of Māori Cosmogony and Its Ethical Resonance with Assisted Dying

Te Kore and Te Pō and Assisted Dying

The early stages of the pūrākau, particularly Te Kore and Te Pō, reveal a worldview in which darkness, void, and unformed potential are not feared but revered. These realms are generative and deeply relational. Royal (2003) explains that Te Kore is not emptiness but a state teeming with latent potential, the foundation of all existence. Rather than viewing death as final or negative, this cosmological perspective understands it as part of a cyclical journey, an eventual return to potential.

In this context, assisted dying can be reframed as a pathway through which one may return to Te Kore with dignity and relational harmony, rather than being forcibly held in Te Ao Mārama (the world of light) amid suffering.

Tension Between Union and Separation: The Ethics of Intervention

The central drama of separating Rangī and Papa reveals tensions around intervention. Tāwhirimātea, Tūmātauenga, and Tāne represent differing moral standpoints. As noted by Hemara (2000), these atua exemplify archetypes of human behaviour conflict, compassion, and innovation. This triadic discourse parallels contemporary debates around assisted dying. Tūmātauenga's readiness to slay his parents mirrors arguments for asserting autonomy to end suffering. Tāne's solution, separation without violence, suggests a middle ground: a compassionate but active response. Such deliberation reflects tikanga Māori's flexible ethical landscape, prioritizing intention, relationality, and the minimization of harm (Mead, 2003).

Emergence of Light: Illumination Through Action

The movement into Te Ao Mārama represents more than physical light; it symbolizes clarity, knowledge, and ethical awareness (Royal, 2003). In the assisted dying context, this shift reflects the illumination gained through kōrero, wānanga, and decision-making in the face of terminal illness. Rather than viewing assisted death as moral darkness, it may be seen as the product of Mārama, clarity reached through pain, compassion, and critical engagement. This reflects whanaungatanga and aroha as ethical touchstones guiding the decision to intervene.

Mauri, Oranga, and the Role of Suffering

The pūrākau also engages with the concept of mauri ora, the emergence of life, vitality, and well-being. Tāne's actions brought forth light and allowed the natural world to flourish. His choice was not simply about alleviating suffering; it was about creating conditions for growth, potential, and oranga (health, well-being) (Royal, 2005). Likewise, advocates of assisted dying argue that in some cases death can be an act of compassion, restoring dignity and ending suffering when mauri has irrevocably diminished (Ministry of Health, 2021).

Yet, as in the pūrākau, such acts come with grief and rupture. The separation of Rangī and Papa introduced enduring sorrow: Ranginui's tears fall as rain; Papatūānuku's sighs rise as mist. These enduring expressions of grief echo the realities for whānau who live with the emotional, cultural, and spiritual aftermath of assisted death. Even when such decisions are made with care and compassion, they are rarely without consequence.

Ongoing Conflict and Coexistence: The Unsettled Nature of Ethical Choices

Tāwhirimātea's ongoing fury and Tūmātauenga's retributive action illustrate that ethical decisions can generate long-term tensions. Tikanga, as argued by Durie (1998), is not fixed but contextual and interpretive. Māori communities may differ in their acceptance of assisted dying, and this plurality is consistent with Māori legal and ethical traditions. As Mead (2003) emphasizes, what matters is not uniformity but the integrity of the process: that it honours whakapapa, mana, and the collective.

Tūmātauenga and Agency: Assertion of Control Over Life and Death

Tūmātauenga's assertion of control over his siblings' domains is complex. While it has been interpreted as violent (Hemara, 2000), it also represents human agency. In relation to assisted dying, his actions suggest the legitimacy of decisive, mana-driven choices grounded in accountability. As Mahuika (2012) argues, mana motuhake requires not only rights but responsibilities. When undertaken with aroha and in accordance with whānau, assisted dying may be seen as a courageous assertion of such agency.

Tūmātauenga and the Ethics of Action

Tūmātauenga's role invites reflection on the tension between decisiveness and relational rupture. His argument that drastic action may be necessary to end collective suffering aligns with some framings of assisted dying as an assertion of agency over one's condition. However, his subsequent estrangement from his brothers and his assertion of dominion over the natural world caution against actions that disregard relational consequences. In Māori contexts, assisted dying that is pursued in isolation, disconnected from whakapapa, tikanga, and whānau risks severing the delicate fabric of relational balance that sustains identity and belonging (Durie, 2001; Mead, 2003). Tūmātauenga's narrative reminds us that choices involving life and death carry the weight of utu, not revenge but the requirement to restore balance. Assisted dying, then, is not merely an individual right but a collective challenge: how do we uphold manaakitanga (care), preserve mana, and honour the wairua of the dying while navigating the shifting ethical terrain of contemporary medicine?

Tikanga-Informed Approaches to End-of-Life Care

Tāne's method of separation—patient, thoughtful, and creative—offers a model for tikanga-informed approaches to end-of-life care. Rather than seeking to destroy, he created space. In the context of assisted dying, this could translate into creating spaces of aroha, whakarongo (deep listening), and mana-enhancing care. Such an approach does not begin with the question “Should we allow someone to die?” but instead asks, “How can we best uphold their dignity, their whakapapa, and their spiritual integrity at this time?”

This requires healthcare systems to understand and respect Māori frameworks, to consult with whānau, and to ensure that the dying process honours tikanga rather than subverts it. It also asks Māori communities to engage openly with changing contexts, including the legalization of assisted dying, and to determine, within their own kawa and tikanga, how such practices might align—or conflict—with cultural values.

The pūrākau of Rangi and Papa does not prescribe answers; rather, it offers a dynamic ethical compass. It encourages reflection on the nature of suffering, the responsibilities of kin, and the values that underpin decisions of life and death. It cautions us against easy resolutions, reminds us of the sacredness of connection, and foregrounds whakaaro nui the exercise of deep, considered thought in the face of difficult choices.

In navigating assisted dying, Māori communities may draw strength and wisdom from such ancestral narratives not to retreat into the past, but to guide present-day decisions that are grounded in cultural integrity, spiritual awareness, and collective well-being.

Ethical Themes and Contemporary Resonance

This pūrākau reveals several layered ethical insights that resonate with modern debates around assisted dying.

Necessity of separation.

The children of Rangi and Papa were not motivated by malice, but by the desire for ora, for space, freedom, and growth. Similarly, in some cases of assisted dying, individuals seek to end not life itself, but unrelenting suffering that confines and diminishes quality of life.

Choice of means

Tūmātauenga advocates destruction for the sake of liberation, while Tāne chooses transformation. This presents a powerful metaphor for how change can be enacted either violently or respectfully. Assisted dying, when viewed through Tāne's lens, might be seen as a final act of whakaora, bringing peace and dignity through considered choice, not force.

Moral disagreement among siblings

The children of Rangi and Papa disagree deeply on the right course of action, reflecting the tensions that may arise within whānau or society when grappling with end-of-life decisions. The story models a collective ethical process, where diverse views are heard, tested, and enacted through tikanga.

Tūmātauenga's agency

Tūmātauenga is often viewed with unease because of his association with war and violence, but he also represents mana motuhake, the capacity to act decisively, to confront harsh realities, and to take responsibility. His perspective complicates the narrative, reminding us that autonomy and accountability are intertwined, especially in life-and-death decisions.

Hineahuone and Assisted Dying

The creation of Hineahuone by Tāne-māhuta, drawn from the red ochre of Kurawaka, represents one of the most profound expressions of creative, spiritual, and relational origins in te ao Māori. This narrative not only conveys the origins of human life but also establishes foundational concepts such as wairua (spirit), mauri (life force), and ha ora (the breath of life), which continue to influence Māori perspectives on existence, vitality, and death. When examined through the lens of assisted dying, this pūrākau invites critical reflection on the nature of life, what it means to live with dignity, and how spiritual concepts shape Māori understandings of mortality and agency.

Ha Ora and the Sacredness of Life

The act of Tāne breathing life into Hineahuone—ha ora—is not merely a biological function but a sacred transmission of vitality and essence. As Royal (2003) explains, “ha ora symbolizes the infusion of spiritual energy that makes one truly alive.” In this light, life is not reduced to physiological activity but understood as the presence of wairua and mauri. This concept provides a critical lens through which assisted dying may be interpreted: when the ha ora has been exhausted or when wairua is burdened beyond repair, the continuance of physical life alone may not fulfill the holistic definition of ora (well-being) central to Māori thinking (Durie, 2001).

Kurawaka and Creative Potential

Kurawaka, the site of Hineahuone's creation, symbolizes the generative power of Papatūānuku and the cyclical nature of life and death. It is from the earth that human life is formed and, ultimately, to the earth it returns. Hemara (2000) notes that such narratives embed the understanding that death is part of a natural cycle, not an aberration. The symbolism of Kurawaka reinforces a relational connection to land and ancestors, where death, if navigated in alignment with tikanga, can be an act of reconnection and restoration. In the context of assisted dying, this suggests that decisions made with whānau, guided by wairua, and in accordance with collective values may be spiritually legitimate.

Hinetītama and the Liminal Space of Transition

Hinetītama, as the daughter of Tāne and Hineahuone, embodies transition, awakening, and the threshold between states. Her name and role signify liminality, the space between light and darkness, life, and death. Royal (2003) describes this as a space of potential revelation and transformation. In assisted dying discourse, the terminal stage of life may be conceptualized as such a liminal space: a moment of heightened clarity, spiritual significance, and transition. It is in these moments that Māori ethics may prioritize mana motuhake (self-determination), especially when sustained ora is no longer possible. Decisions made in this liminal space can thus be deeply sacred rather than morally transgressive.

Hinetītama, Hinenuitepō, and Assisted Dying

The transformation of Hinetītama into Hinenuitepō is among the most poignant narratives in Māori cosmogony. It depicts the emotional, spiritual, and moral complexity of identity, agency, and the transition between life and death. This pūrākau embodies the dualities of light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, and life and afterlife. Its resonance with contemporary debates around assisted dying lies in its articulation of choice, dignity, and the enduring role of wairua in decisions surrounding death. It also offers an Indigenous moral framework in which death is neither feared nor denied but embraced as a necessary and sacred aspect of existence (Royal, 2003).

Whakapapa, Shame, and the Ethics of Leaving

Hinetītama's realization of her incestuous relationship with Tāne results in profound emotional and spiritual distress. Her departure is not an act of suicide, but one of conscious transformation. As Mahuika (2015) argues, whakapapa is central to Māori identity, and the betrayal of that whakapapa breaches the tapu that binds relational integrity. Rather than seeking revenge or retribution, Hinetītama's decision to become Hinenuitepō reflects an assertion of mana wahine (female authority and agency) in response to unbearable dissonance. Her choice to leave Te Ao Mārama demonstrates a culturally embedded ethic of choosing death not as an escape, but as a realignment with cosmic responsibility.

Hinenuitepō and the Guardianship of Death

Upon her transition to Hinenuitepō, Hinetītama assumes guardianship over Rarohenga, the spiritual realm of the dead. In doing so, she does not abandon life but creates equilibrium between realms. This dual guardianship Tāne over life and Hinenuitepō over death mirrors the Māori worldview that death is not the antithesis of life, but its complement (Durie, 2001; Mead, 2003). Her

statement, “Māku e tiaki te pō,” asserts that death too requires care, tikanga, and manaakitanga. In this context, assisted dying can be interpreted not as a denial of life’s sanctity, but as a spiritual and ethical transition into the domain of Hinenuitepō, undertaken with ceremony, purpose, and dignity.

The Role of the Guide: Spiritual Accompaniment in Transition

Some traditions recount the presence of a senior female spiritual guide who aids Hinetītama’s transformation. This figure symbolizes the communal and intergenerational guidance that accompanies major transitions. In modern contexts, whānau, kaumātua, tohunga, and palliative care professionals often fulfill similar roles. The notion of assisted dying being supported by a collective rather than conducted in isolation aligns with the Māori principle of whakawhanaungatanga, where spiritual, emotional, and relational support is integral to the journey toward death (Pere, 1991; Smith, 2012).

Hineahuone and Hinetītama: The Origins of Life and Death

Tāne’s creation of Hineahuone from the red clay of Kurawaka symbolizes the sacredness of bodily life human origins are both spiritual and earthly. Hineahuone becomes the first human woman, and her daughter, Hinetītama, is born from the union between Tāne and Hineahuone. Upon learning that Tāne is both her father and husband, Hinetītama descends to Te Pō, transforming into Hinenuitepō, the goddess of death (Pere, 1991; Reedy, 1993).

The transformation of Hinetītama is pivotal as it marks the beginning of death not as punishment, but as a passage, a reclaiming of agency. Her journey is one of profound grief, betrayal, and restoration of balance. In embracing the role of Hinenuitepō, she becomes the kaitiaki of a just and sacred transition. This pūrākau frames death as neither failure nor fear, but as a continuation of whakapapa, grounded in spiritual ethics and collective well-being.

This narrative can enrich understandings of assisted dying, particularly in how individuals may seek to reclaim dignity and control over their own death. Just as Hinenuitepō reshaped her role and chose her path, patients may view assisted dying as a sacred and considered act one that upholds mana rather than undermines it.

Māui and the Challenge to Mortality

Māui Pōtiki’s attempt to overcome death by entering Hinenuitepō and reversing the cycle of mortality represents the human impulse to resist death. Māui’s failure is crucial: it reinforces the inevitability and sacredness of death within te ao Māori. Royal (2003) and Hemara (2000) note that immortality was not gifted to humans, as death provides balance and return to source. The laughter of the piwakawaka, Māui’s companion, disrupts his stealth, reflecting the role of tohu (omens or signs) and wairua in the regulation of cosmic order (Orbell, 1995). In relation to assisted dying, this suggests that attempts to unnaturally prolong life at the cost of well-being may conflict with Māori cosmological ethics. Acceptance of death, especially when accompanied by unbearable suffering, may be more culturally resonant than aggressive life-prolonging measures.

This pūrākau highlights the danger of overstepping boundaries, particularly those associated with tapu and balance. Māui’s transgression is not merely personal ambition, but it represents the imposition of control over a natural process ordained by atua. In terms of assisted dying, this pūrākau might serve as a cautionary tale about human attempts to dominate the domain of death without proper spiritual and communal guidance. Yet, Māui’s failure does not negate the pursuit of well-being. Instead, it reinforces the importance of relational ethics, of understanding death not as

a solitary event, but as one embedded in layers of meaning, tapu, and spiritual consequence. Table 1 summarizes the ethical insights drawn from each narrative and atua.

Table 1
Ethical themes derived from pūrākau and key atua

Atua	Associated Themes	Ethical Insights
Ranginui and Papatūānuku	Sacred union; grief and enduring connection	Their unwilling separation represents the pain of necessary change. Their continued grief reminds us that ethical decisions are often made at the expense of an emotional and spiritual cost.
Tāne	Compassionate intervention; creation and transformation; whakapapa; oranga	Proposes separation without violence; creates first woman with care and breath of life (hāora); models manaakitanga and the ethics of creating space rather than destruction.
Tūmātauenga	Decisive agency; mana motuhake; utu; relational rupture	Argues for ending suffering through destruction; later asserts dominion over nature. Embodies autonomy and responsibility, but with long-term relational consequences.
Tāwhirimātea	Grief; resistance to change	His storms symbolize the emotional backlash and moral disagreement that can accompany ethical decisions like assisted dying.
Hineahuone	Wairua; mauri; sacred origins	Symbol of the sacredness of life and interconnectedness with whenua; affirms that bodily and spiritual integrity are foundational.
Hinetītama / Hinenuitēpō	Dignity in death; transformation; mana wahine; spiritual guardianship	Chooses death with purpose and agency; her transformation teaches that death is sacred, not shameful, and can be embraced as part of whakapapa and cosmic balance.
Māui	Hubris; overstepping sacred limits; inevitability of death	Seeks to defeat death and fails; his journey warns against disrupting the natural order without spiritual and communal consent.

A Kaupapa Māori Framework for Interpreting Death and Assisted Dying

The pūrākau above can be interpreted through the following Māori concepts:

Whakapapa: Each being, including humans, is connected to atua and the natural world. Death is not an end, but a continuation of one's whakapapa journey.

Wairua: Spiritual well-being is central. Assisted dying must not only respond to physical suffering but be grounded in wairua-based decision-making.

Mana motuhake: The right to exercise autonomy, especially in end-of-life decisions, must be upheld but always in relation to whānau, whakapapa, and atua.

Tapu and Noa: Death is inherently tapu. Any decision to hasten death requires careful transition through ritual, care, and karakia to restore noa and balance.

Kaitiakitanga: Those involved—health practitioners, whānau, and the individual—are not owners of life and death but guardians of its passage.

Figure 1

A Kaupapa Māori framework for interpreting death and assisted dying

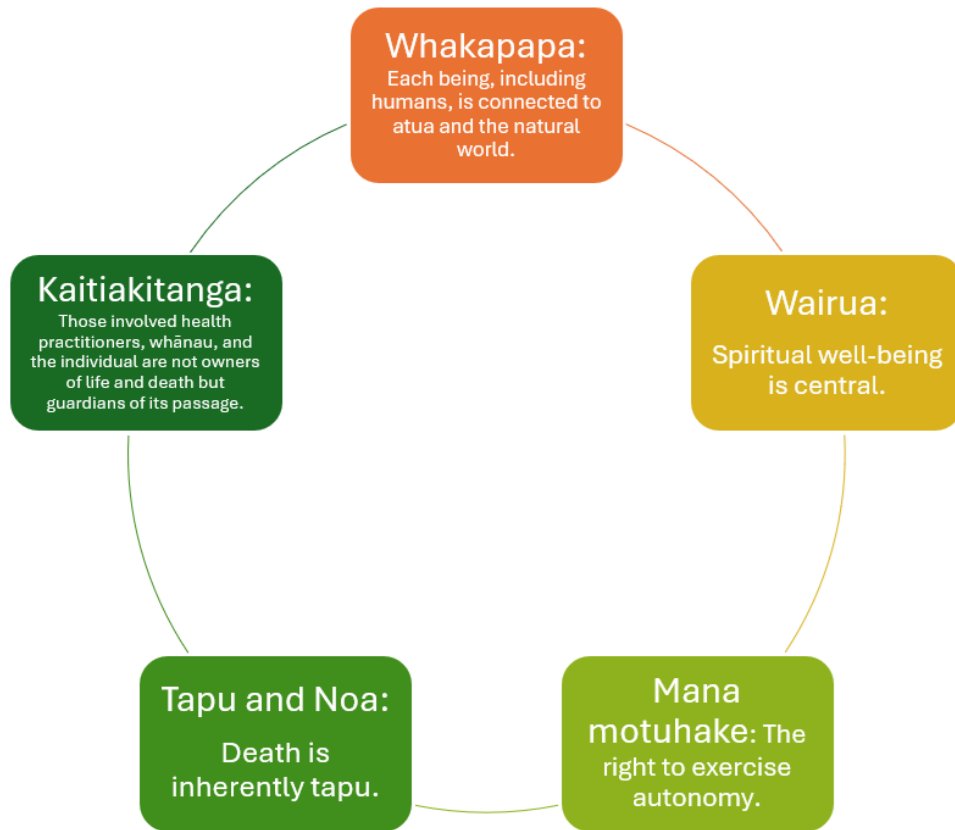


Figure 1 illustrates the tikanga or principles that can be used to offer guidance in developing more culturally aligned protocols for assisted dying among Māori. They are neither hierarchal nor sequential, however they are considered as deemed appropriate by each individual and/or whānau. The End-of-Life Choice Act is not inherently incompatible with tikanga Māori but must be approached through culturally embedded processes of whanaungatanga, spiritual discernment, and collective dialogue.

Comparing to Assisted Dying Practices

The End-of-Life Choice Act 2019 permits eligible individuals to receive medical assistance to end their life under strict legal conditions (Ministry of Health, 2019). From a biomedical perspective, this centres the individual’s right to avoid intolerable suffering. However, such frameworks often isolate the individual from the wider relational context emphasized in Māori worldviews.

Where Western paradigms may see death as a right or a medical procedure, Māori pūrākau and frameworks locate death within te ao wairua and te ao kikokiko (the spiritual and physical worlds). Therefore, assisted dying for Māori must go beyond consent and clinical eligibility. It should include tikanga-based assessments of wairua, whānau involvement, karakia, and appropriate cultural guidance. (Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2021)

Conclusion: Reframing Assisted Dying Through Indigenous Ethics

The pūrākau explored in this article offer profound insight into the ethical, spiritual, and relational foundations of death within te ao Māori. While each narrative arises from a distinct cosmological context, they collectively reframe death not as a biological terminus, but as a continuation of whakapapa and wairua, governed by relational accountability and cosmic balance.

This article responds to several critical gaps in Indigenous health literature. First, it provides a culturally grounded alternative to dominant Western end-of-life paradigms by theorising assisted dying through the lens of pūrākau and Kaupapa Māori principles. Second, it challenges the marginalization of spiritual and whānau-based considerations in clinical practice, emphasising that death is a relational event requiring collective deliberation, karakia, and cultural support. Third, it elevates pūrākau from narrative to ethical methodology, offering a dynamic model for interpreting end-of-life decision-making in culturally resonant ways.

The ethical positions of atua such as Tūmātauenga, Tāne, and Hinenuitēpō illuminate complex perspectives on agency, relational responsibility, and mana motuhake. These dimensions are absent from statutory frameworks such as the End-of-Life Choice Act 2019, which remains focused on individual rights and biomedical definitions of suffering. Through a tikanga-informed lens, we argue that assisted dying must be approached not only as a matter of legal eligibility but also as a sacred process involving spiritual discernment, whānau dialogue, and collective ethics.

In weaving together cosmological insights and contemporary debates, this article contributes to a more expansive and culturally grounded understanding of assisted dying. It affirms that the inclusion of Indigenous worldviews in health policy and clinical practice is not merely additive, but transformative. By embedding tikanga and pūrākau into health ethics, we move toward a future where death is not merely managed but honoured, and where cultural, spiritual, and ethical integrity is maintained throughout the most vulnerable stages of human life.

As such, this article invites further inquiry into how Indigenous ethical frameworks can reshape health policy, not only in Aotearoa but across global Indigenous contexts. The braided rivers of Indigenous and Western knowledge need not be adversarial; rather, they can be woven together to guide compassionate, culturally affirming pathways toward oranga and dignified death.

Just as this article opened with a karakia to acknowledge the sacredness of the kaupapa (topic), it is equally fitting to conclude with one, as a means of ritually closing the space and ensuring the spiritual and emotional well-being of all who engage with its content.

Karakia whakakapi	A closing spiritual chant
Ka hiki te tapu	the sacred is lifted,
Ka hiki te noa	and the ordinary restored
Ka hoki te mauri ki te wā kāinga	the mauri returns to its home
Haere i raro i te korowai o te rangimārie	Go under the cloak of peace
Kia tau ngā manaakitanga	May the blessings
a te wāhi ngaro	of our ancestors be upon us
Haumi ē!	Let it be bound,
Hui ē!	unified,
Tāiki ē!	Affirmed!

Acknowledgements

Tēnei rā te mihi aroha ki te hunga kua wehe atu ki te pō, me te whakamiha ki te hunga ora kua whai wāhi mai ki te tuhinga nei. E kore rātou e warewaretia. Nā rātou, nā ā rātou mahi, i whakatakoto te tūāpapa mō tēnei kaupapa nui. Ki ngā ringa raupā i tautoko, i tuari i ō rātou mātauranga, i hāpai hoki i te wairua o tēnei rangahau—ka nui te mihi. Ko koutou ngā poutokomanawa o tēnei tuhinga, ko tō koutou aroha, ko tō koutou mātauranga, ko tō koutou tautoko, ngā aho i whatu ai tēnei kaupapa.

The authors would like to extend our heartfelt acknowledgements to those who have passed into the night, and to those living who have contributed to the development of this article. The departed are never forgotten—for it is through their lives and legacies that this work has found form. To the hands and hearts who supported us, shared their knowledge, and upheld the spiritual integrity of this research—we are deeply grateful. You are the pillars of this writing, and it is your love, wisdom, and guidance that are woven into its every thread.

References

- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4):373–395.
- Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. UBC Press.
- Durie, M. (1998). *Te mana, te kāwanatanga: The politics of Māori self-determination*. Oxford University Press.
- Durie, M. (2001). *Mauriora: The dynamics of Māori health*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1):Article 10.
- Gott, M., Moeke-Maxwell, T., Morgan, T., Black, S., & Williams, L. (2016). Working bi-culturally within a palliative care research context: The development of the Te Arai Palliative Care and End of Life Research Group. *Mortality*, 21(3):219–236.
- Guedes, C. B., Hamacher, D. W., Barsa, J., Day, E., Day, R., Passi, S., & Tapim, A. (2018). Death and Maier: Meteors and mortuary rites in the eastern Torres Strait. *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, 21(3):39–59. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3316/informit.142840376291813>.
- Haining, C. M., Willmott, L., White, B. P., & First Nations contributors. (2023). First Nations perspectives in law-making about voluntary assisted dying. *Journal of Law and Medicine*, 30(3):716–744.
- Hemara, W. (2000). *Māori pedagogies: A view from the literature*. NZCER.
- Jenkinson, S. (2015). *Die wise: A manifesto for sanity and soul*. North Atlantic Books.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Mahuika, N. (2012). *Kōrero tuku iho. Reconfiguring oral history and oral tradition*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Waikato].
- Mead, H. M. (2003). *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*. Huia Publishers.
- Ministry of Health. (2019). *End of life choice act*. Government of New Zealand. <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2019/0067/latest/whole.html>.
- Moeke-Maxwell, T., Mason, K., Gott, M., Casey, H., Duffy, J., Beresford, P., McLaughlin, H., & Cameron, C. (2021). New Zealand's Indigenous end-of-life care customs: A qualitative study on Māori, by Māori, for Māori, with Māori. In *The Routledge Handbook of Service User Involvement in Human Services Research and Education* (pp. 347–358). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429433306-37>.
- Moeke-Maxwell, T., Gott, M., & Mason, K. (2023). New Zealand's indigenous end-of-life care customs: A qualitative study on Māori, by Māori, for Māori, with Māori. In *Indigenous End-of-Life Care Customs* (pp. 347–358). Routledge.
- Orbell, M. (1995). *The illustrated encyclopedia of Māori myth and legend*. Canterbury University Press.
- Pere, R. (1991). *Te Wheke: A celebration of infinite wisdom*. Ao Ako Global Learning.
- Reedy, A. (1993). *Nga Kōrero a Mohi Ruatapu: The teachings of a tohunga*. Canterbury University Press.
- Roberts, M., Haami, B., Benton, R., Satterfield, T., Finucane, M., Henare, M., & Henare, M. (2004). Whakapapa as a Māori mental construct: Some implications for the debate over genetic modification of organisms. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(1):1–28.
- Royal, Te A. C. (Ed.). (2003). *The woven universe: Selected writings of Rev. Maori Marsden*. Estate of Rev. Maori Marsden.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonising methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 2nd edition.

Appendix

A Glossary of Māori Terms

Māori Term	English Translation / Explanation
Aroha	Love, compassion, empathy
Atua	Deity, God; spiritual beings associated with natural domains
Ha ora	Breath of life; sacred infusion of vitality
Hineahuone	The first woman, created by Tāne from the red clay of Kurawaka
Hinetītama	Daughter of Tāne and Hineahuone; becomes Hinenuitēpō upon discovering her whakapapa
Hinenuitēpō	Goddess of night and death; guardian of Rarohenga (the spiritual realm of the dead)
Iwi	Tribe, extended kinship group
Kaitiakitanga	Guardianship, stewardship, especially of spiritual or environmental taonga
Karakia	Incantation, prayer, ritual chant
Kaupapa	Topic
Kawa	Protocols or customs specific to a particular place or group
Kurawaka	Sacred place from which the first woman was created; symbol of creative and reproductive potential
Mana	Spiritual authority, prestige, power
Mana motuhake	Autonomy, self-determination; individual or collective sovereignty
Manaakitanga	Hospitality, care, support for others
Mauri	Life force, vital essence
Mauri ora	State of well-being, vitality, and life
Mate	Death, also used for sickness
Noa	The state of being free from tapu; ordinary, unrestricted
Papatūānuku	Earth Mother; primal parent in Māori cosmology
Pō / Te Pō	Darkness: the metaphysical realm that precedes the world of light and form
Pūrākau	Ancestral narrative, traditional story, often containing layered philosophical or ethical meanings
Ranginui	Sky Father; primal parent in Māori cosmology
Rarohenga	The spiritual realm of the dead
Tapu	Sacred, restricted, spiritually potent
Tāne / Tāne-māhuta	Atua of forests and birds; creator of humans in Māori cosmology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INDIGENOUS HEALTH

Māori Term	English Translation / Explanation
Tangaroa	Atua of the ocean
Tāwhirimātea	Atua of wind and weather
Te Ao Mārama	The world of light, clarity, and understanding; the physical world
Te Kore	The realm of potential being void of unformed potential
Te Wheiao	Transitional space between light and darkness (not used explicitly but relevant to liminality concepts)
Tikanga	Custom, correct procedure, Māori ethical framework
Tohunga	Expert, priest, ritual specialist
Tūmātauenga	Atua of war and humanity; represents agency, conflict, and response to betrayal
Utu	Reciprocity, balance, restoration of harmony
Wairua	Spirit, soul; spiritual dimension of a person
Wānanga	Seminar, knowledge sharing gathering; also to discuss and deliberate
Whakapapa	Genealogy, lineage, relational framework connecting people to each other, the land, and the cosmos
Whakataukī	Proverb
Whānau	Extended family group
Whanaungatanga	Relationships, kinship ties, sense of connectedness
Whakaaro nui	Deep and considered thought
Whakaora	To heal, save, or revive, restoring life or well-being