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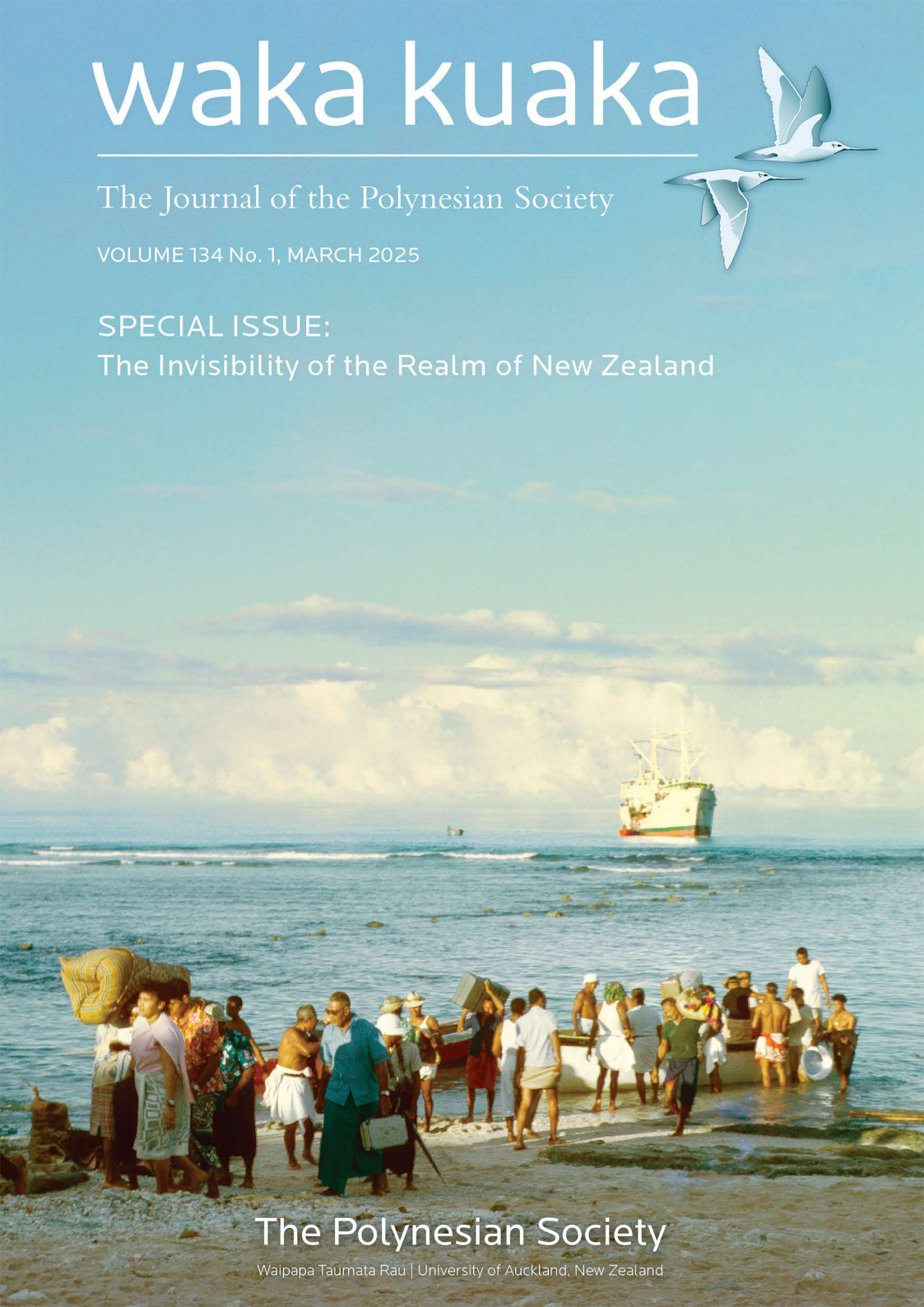
The Invisibility of the Realm of New Zealand



The Polynesian Society

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LINGUICIDE AND THE REALM OF NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT: "New Zealand proper" is home to the majority of the population of the so-called Realm of New Zealand countries along with significant populations from the independent nations of Sāmoa and Tonga. All these groups are facing language maintenance challenges, similar to so many Indigenous language groups in the world today. However, there is stark contrast in the maintenance status between the languages of the Realm and those of the independent nations. Bluntly, the Realm languages are severely endangered in comparison with Samoan and Tongan. This paper describes how the Realm of New Zealand has enacted and continues to enact linguicide on the languages of the Realm while at the same time deliberately invisibilising the existence of the Realm. It proposes that Indigenous peoples of the Realm should reorient their language revitalisation focus away from the "home" and the individual to the level of the community, and pursue trans-Indigenous collaboration with tangata whenua (the Māori people of Aotearoa or New Zealand proper) along with other tangata moana (Indigenous peoples of the Pacific) who are manuhiri (guests) in Aotearoa.

Keywords: language revitalisation, linguistic justice, colonisation, language and culture, Māori, Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Tokelauan

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Kia orana. 'E tama'ine Ma'uke a Ake tei 'āngai'ia e Taranaki (Aotearoa). 'E tamāroa Rarotonga a Jesse. (Greetings. Ake is from Ma'uke and was raised by Taranaki of Aotearoa. Jesse is from Rarotonga.) Thank you to our colleagues who have collaborated on this special themed issue of *Waka Kuaka* for your important kōrero (discussions). We now turn to the languages of the tropical latitudes of the Realm of New Zealand (thus excluding Aotearoa or New Zealand proper). We compare the vitality of the tropical Realm languages to other Pacific languages spoken in Aotearoa along with Māori Aotearoa (the Māori language of Aotearoa). We show that the Realm languages (including Māori Aotearoa) are less successfully maintained than the non-Realm Pacific languages (e.g., Samoan and Tongan). We then describe the linguicide perpetrated by the settler government of New Zealand proper on tropical Realm languages, primarily via the mechanism of

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formal education over the last century. We suggest that language reclamation, with its attendant social benefits, is best approached from our ancestors' navigatory perspective—a perspective that draws on the vast curiosity and creative capacity of our peoples who share a whakapapa (heritage, ancestry, genealogy) of enquiry and collectivism. The Indigenous peoples of the Realm and of New Zealand's sphere of influence, or the New Zealandosphere more broadly (see Salesa 2018), share this whakapapa. Collaboration across this whānau (close kinship group) is the most effective strategy for our collective empowerment, wellbeing and cultural resilience.

The New Zealand settler state has unequivocally perpetrated linguicide against all Indigenous languages of the Realm: Māori Aotearoa (maor1246), Moriori (mori1267), gagana Tokelau (Tokelauan, toke1240), vagahau Niue (Niuean, niue1239), Māori 'Avaiki Nui (Cook Islands Māori, raro1241) and leo Wale (Pukapukan, puka1242).[1] However, the linguicide of the tropical Realm languages (henceforth Realm languages) is almost absent from the New Zealand discourse. Despite the state's obligation under article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to ensure Indigenous peoples' access to their languages (United Nations 2008), the Crown aggressively refutes the idea that New Zealand has a constitutional responsibility to the tropical Realm languages (de Bres 2015). This refusal obfuscates the ongoing nature of the genocidal colonial occupation by the settler state, and as a result, this colonial crime of linguicide remains unnoticed and unatoned.

MĀORI AOTEAROA CONTEXTUALISATION

The revitalisation and reclamation of te reo Māori o Aotearoa (the Māori language of Aotearoa) by tangata whenua (Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa) is widely considered to be an exemplar extraordinaire of the language revitalisation process. There is widespread access to formal education with Māori as the language of instruction, and there are once again young speakers who have learnt the language via the "natural" process of intergenerational transmission in combination with the "constructed" linguistic environment of a Māori medium education setting. Furthermore, in recent times, there has been a major sea change in New Zealand (the settler state as a whole) wherein the attitudes of both tangata whenua and tangata Tiriti (non-Māori settlers) in Aotearoa have shifted from largely dismissive to a majority who are actively positive (see Buckleton 2018). Although te reo Māori is still only confidently spoken by a minority of Māori people, 30 years of concerted, collective revitalisation efforts have ensured that there is a very strong base on which to continue building. Māori education and revitalisation experts are also contributing significantly to the revitalisation efforts of other Indigenous peoples internationally in many communities, e.g., in Hawai'i (Warner 2001), Canada (Chambers 2015) and Brazil (Berardi-Wiltshire *et al*. 2020).

The Māori renaissance refers to the period of innovative and expansive language and cultural revitalisation that began in the early 1980s and persists to this day. This revolution was precipitated by the perilous state in which te reo Māori found itself in the late 1970s as a result of the linguicide perpetrated by the settler state of New Zealand on tangata whenua. Linguicide is a shamefully normalised crime of colonisation, and it is not particularly controversial to name it as such in New Zealand's contemporary discourse (for a general definition of linguicide see Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995; for an in-depth case study of Canadian linguicide see Mackay 2024). When the relative success of the Māori language revitalisation programme is remarked on by scholars or lay observers it is frequently proposed that New Zealand has only one Indigenous language. This is usually contrasted with the highly complex linguistic situations of Australia or North America. It is not entirely unreasonable to say that Aotearoa has one Indigenous language—te reo Māori (maor1246)—but it is categorically incorrect to make this claim about New Zealand. If the legal entity of New Zealand is the Realm of New Zealand, then the Indigenous languages of the Realm are Indigenous languages of New Zealand.

HOW MANY LANGUAGES ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

So, if the Indigenous languages of the Realm are Indigenous languages of New Zealand, then how many are there? This is a more fraught question than we might assume. Firstly, there is the Moriori language of Rēkohu (Chatham Islands), whose people have begun a reclamation journey with the aim of reawakening a language that has been sleeping. Similarly, Southern Māori or te mita Kāi Tahu is usually considered a variety (a.k.a. dialect) of Māori Aotearoa, but is not readily mutually intelligible to most contemporary speakers of Northern Māori. As such, it could, if the Kāi Tahu (Māori of the New Zealand's South Island) people wish to think of it this way, be considered a distinct language. So, we have not yet left New Zealand proper and might already be up to three languages (we do not include New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), which, although unique to Aotearoa, is not Indigenous, as it is descended from British Sign Language and was introduced by the settlers).[2] Next, in the tropical Realm nations we might initially list vagahau Niue, gagana Tokelau, Wale and Cook Islands Māori (including raro1242, penr1237, raka1237, mang1402).[3] However, the question of how many separate languages there are in the Cook Islands is unsettled. "Lumpers"[4] would say two: Māori (raro1241) and Wale. "Splitters", on the other hand, like the authors of Glottolog, may say three: Southern, Northern and Wale; four: Wale, Southern, Manihiki/Rakahanga and Penrhyn; or even five, with Mangaian considered separate from Southern Cook Islands Māori. So at the most splitter end we get 10 distinct Indigenous languages of the Realm of New Zealand, and even at the most lumper end we get six: Māori Aotearoa, Moriori, gagana Tokelau, vagahau Niue, Māori 'Avaiki Nui and Wale.

INVISIBILISATION IN THE DATA

This level of multilinguistic detail is not part of New Zealand's data collection and presentation focus. A recent example of this wilful aversion of the state's eyes away from this linguistic diversity can be found in using the Stats NZ 2024 tool Aotearoa Data Explorer (https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/aotearoa-data-explorer/). Stats NZ has recently started to publish some curated data from the 2023 census. The public-facing part of census data has always been curated while the full data is accessible to experts, so the principle is not new. However, in a change from earlier censuses, now when searching for overall language use information the lay user sees a comparison of the 20 most spoken languages in New Zealand. None of the Realm languages reach this threshold, so they must be searched individually, and the Realm as a Pacific entity is not used by Stats NZ. Unfortunately, Stats NZ have chosen to not make data on these languages publicly accessible through their website. However, they have created a concept of an "official language", so NZSL and Māori Aotearoa are rightfully emphasised. Yet, while we can use online data sources to compare numbers of Afrikaans and French speakers, we cannot similarly compare numbers of vagahau Niue and Tongan speakers.

THE DATA WE DO HAVE[5]

For this study, access to Pacific heritage language speaker numbers has been undertaken using census data from New Zealand's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) database. The IDI is a resource administered by Stats NZ that contains administration data collected by government departments and survey data gathered by Stats NZ. Access to its data is given to approved researchers for projects set up for analyses using IDI data. Data for the 2013, 2018 and 2023 census counts were used to identify specific Pacific ethnicities and languages spoken by individuals who completed a census survey in those years.[6]

Figure 1 shows that in all Pacific peoples in Aotearoa by 2023, 1 in 4 (24%) were Samoan speakers, 1 in 11 were Tongan speakers (falling from 10% in 2013 to 8% in 2023) and 1 in 33 were speakers of a Realm heritage language (falling from 5% in 2013 to 3% in 2023). The actual numbers of Samoan and Tongan speakers are large enough for them to be included in Stats NZ's top 20 list of most common languages in Aotearoa. Notably the greatest increase was in the proportions of Pacific people who spoke Māori Aotearoa, with a fivefold increase in their numbers by 2023 (with a nearly tenfold increase among Aotearoa-born Pacific people), comprising 5% of the Pacific population. Numbers of Samoan and Tuvaluan speakers increased by 50%, keeping pace with the increase of Pacific numbers overall. While most speakers of their heritage languages were born outside of Aotearoa, the greatest uptake in heritage language speakers in the ten years to 2023

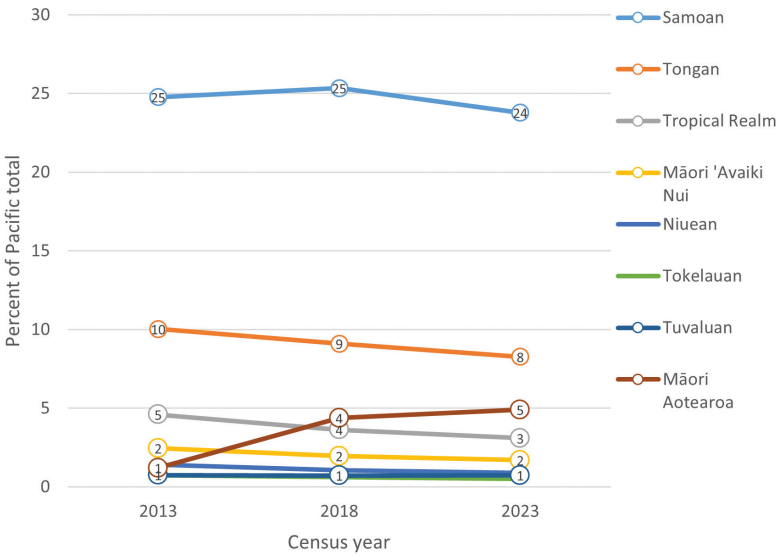

Figure 1. Percentage of Pacific people who reported proficiency in their heritage language in the 2013 (n=295,941), 2018 (n=381,642) and 2023 (n=442,643) censuses.

occurred in the Aotearoa-born group. Though encouraging, that increase was a dwarfed by the 159% increase in the Aotearoa-born population, more than twice that for heritage-language speakers (at most a 72% increase in Aotearoa-born Samoans who speak Samoan).

Figure 2 shows the changing proportions of community members born in Aotearoa who report proficiency in their heritage language, based on census data from 1996 to 2023. While there has been an increase in the most recent census, proficiency rates have been steadily declining. For those born in Aotearoa, compared with Samoan and Tongan speakers of their heritage languages, speakers of languages from the three tropical Realm nations have been consistently low: 5% of Aotearoa-born Realm speakers in 2023 compared with 40% and 30% of Samoan and Tongan heritage speakers, respectively. Within Aotearoa-born Realm speakers, Tokelauan speakers of gagana Tokelau are the most proficient, 16% in 2023, down from 37% in 1996. Proficiency among Aotearoa-born Māori ʻAvaiki Nui has been around 5% since 1996, decreasing further by 2023, and apart from 2023, Niue rates had been on track to match those of Māori ʻAvaiki Nui.

Table 1. Comparison of numbers of proficient heritage language speakers, by place of birth, for the 2013 and 2023 census years.

	2013			2023			% increase by 2023 (rounded to the nearest percentile)		
	Non-Aotearoa-born	Aotearoa-born	Total	Non-Aotearoa-born	Aotearoa-born	Total	Non-Aotearoa-born	Aotearoa-born	Total
Pacific total	181,791	109,800	295,941	158,101	284,542	442,645	−13%	159%	50%
Gagana Sāmoa	46,608	26,715	73,323	63,201	46,002	109,203	36%	72%	49%
Tongan	18,993	10,698	29,691	22,881	15,084	37,965	20%	41%	28%
Realm	10,371	3,249	13,620	9,783	4,413	14,196	−6%	36%	4%
Māori ʻAvaiki Nui	5,997	1,272	7,269	5,727	2,067	7,794	−5%	63%	7%
Vagahau Niue	3,039	1,149	4,188	2,712	1,350	4,062	−11%	17%	−3%
Gagana Tokelau	1,383	849	2,232	1,380	1,017	2,397	0%	20%	7%
Tuvalu	1,596	639	2,235	2,322	1,080	3,402	45%	69%	52%
Māori Aotearoa	1,782	1,785	3,567	3,075	19,452	22,527	73%	990%	532%

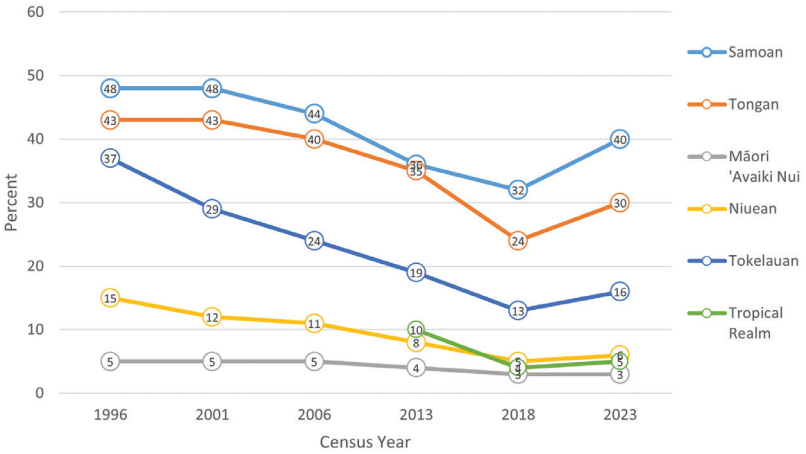

Figure 2. Percentage of Aotearoa-born Pacific population who report proficiency in their heritage language, by language community, 1996–2023 census years (source for 1996–2006: Samu *et al*. 2019; for 2013–2023, Stats NZ).

The main points may be summarised as follows:

(i) The proportion of people who are members of a Pacific language community who report that they speak their heritage language is declining.
(ii) The proportion of Aotearoa-born Pacific people who speak their heritage language is lower than that of their community's overall population.
(iii) People of the Realm have much lower rates of language maintenance both in their overall populations and in their Aotearoa-born populations.
(iv) People of the Realm have a higher proportion of their population who are born in Aotearoa than other Pacific groups.
(v) Realm communities are more advanced in their shift to English than the Pacific communities whose home countries are independent, i.e., Sāmoa, Tonga and Fiji (see Fig. 2).
(vi) Language shift (away from the heritage language to English) is more advanced in the Realm communities than it is in the non-Realm Pacific communities.

LANGUAGE VITALITY

Assessing the vitality of a language is not straightforward. There are several competing methods, and the raw number of speakers is not a strong single factor. A language can have a small number of speakers but high vitality (e.g., Pirahã, pira1253) and vice versa (e.g., Cantonese, yuec1235). The more

important factor is that of intergenerational transmission. Is the language being passed on from parents to children, and are those children using the language in their lives enough that they are likely to pass it on themselves? There has not been a comprehensive investigation into the vitality of Pacific languages in New Zealand since the Languages of Manukau project (Taumoefolau et al. 2002), but more recent qualitative investigations indicate that the pattern of decreasing proficiency amongst younger people identified in that study is continuing and even accelerating (Glasgow 2019; McCaffery and McFall-McCaffery 2010; Samu et al. 2019; Tukimata 2017). Speakers of Realm languages in New Zealand are likely to be older (Samu *et al*. 2019).

From our findings we infer that intergenerational transmission is very low for Māori ʻAvaiki Nui and vagahau Niue and dropping off for gagana Tokelau. Unfortunately, leo Wale is not identified in our analysis because we cannot deduce the total population of Pukapukan people in either New Zealand or the Cook Islands as this data is not systematically gathered. By contrast, the figures for Samoan and Tongan show a relatively healthy state of affairs—albeit indicating a shift to English is in progress. In New Zealand the Tongan population is roughly the same as the Cook Islands population but has five times the number of speakers. Amongst the Aotearoa-born, and therefore younger, portion of the populations, 30% of Tongans versus 3% of Cook Islanders report proficiency in their heritage language. Samoan New Zealanders have similar rates of language retention to the Tongans with larger raw numbers due to their larger population. In both the Tongan and Samoan populations intergenerational transmission is happening successfully in a significant minority of families.

Another factor in the overall endangerment of the Realm languages is that they do not have large populations of speakers in the ʻenua kāinga (home islands) who can act as kaitiaki (guardians) for the languages. The home populations of the Realm countries are approximately 14,000 for the Cook Islands, 1,500 for Niue and 1,300 for Tokelau. By contrast, the non-Realm Pacific languages listed here all have a minority, if slight, of their people based in New Zealand as well as good language vitality in their relatively well-populated ʻenua kāinga. In those places, the languages are also protected, as contact with monolingual English contexts is infrequent. The main Indigenous language is still the lingua franca amongst the Indigenous populations in the independent countries. By contrast, in the Cook Islands (Nicholas 2018) and Niue (B. Togahai, pers. comm, 13 May 2020), English is becoming dominant. In primary schools in Rarotonga and Niue, teachers report that over 90% of children arrive at school dominant, or monolingual, in English. More encouragingly, in Tokelau, gagana Tokelau remains the dominant language of adults and children (Willans and Jukes 2017: e265). Tokelau's language maintenance success is, at least partially, because of

the relative difficulty people in Tokelau have in traveling to and from New Zealand. There is no airport, and infrequent sea travel via Sāmoa is the main means of transit. What is sometimes seen as a disadvantage can here be viewed as a blessing in disguise for language maintenance. An analogous pattern can be seen in the Pā 'Enua (islands other than Rarotonga) of the Cook Islands where, in contrast with Rarotonga, most children still speak the local variety (Nicholas 2018).

So, we can see a pattern where the Realm languages, including Māori Aotearoa,[7] are appreciably more endangered in New Zealand than the languages whose 'enua kāinga are politically independent (e.g., Sāmoa, Tonga). Furthermore, this pattern extends to the 'enua kāinga where a shift to English is advanced, at least in the Cook Islands and Niue.

LINGUICIDE AT THE ALTAR OF FORMAL EDUCATION

There is a misconception that the New Zealand government should not put resources into supporting Pacific languages, even those of the Realm, because they are spoken in the home islands and therefore are not New Zealand's responsibility (de Bres 2015: 683). As we can see from the discussion above, this view is erroneous. But the New Zealand government has not simply neglected the Realm languages; it has actively worked towards their marginalisation.

The most powerful site of this aggression is the formal education space. Education in the Realm is still paternalistically overseen by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and schools in the Realm largely follow the New Zealand curriculum. This curriculum prescribes English or Māori (Aotearoa) as the language of instruction (Benton 1981; Biewer 2015; for a fuller discussion see Nicholas 2018).

I (Ake) was once teaching a class on new vocabulary development to a group of Māori ('Avaiki Nui) speakers working as teachers in the Cook Islands education system. I gave them an example of a vocabulary development approach where a language community uses a word for a familiar phenomenon and adds a modifier to that to form a word for an analogous new phenomenon. Under this model, European-introduced mammals in the Cook Islands have names based on the names of Māori-introduced mammals, puaka (pig) or kiore (rat). So, a horse is called puaka 'oro 'enua (lit: running pig) and a cow/bovine is called puaka toro (lit: bull pig; toro is a loan word from Spanish), whereas a cat is a kiore ngiao (meowing rat). As part of the preparation for an exercise with my class, I asked what I assumed would be a straightforward scene-setting question: which mammals were here (in the Cook Islands) before Europeans arrived? The answer I was expecting was pigs, rats and dogs. However, absolute ahistorical chaos ensued. Seemingly every mammal species they knew of

was proposed, with the most egregiously incorrect answer being cats.[8] I predict that almost no one who has lived in Aotearoa for longer than a few years would struggle with the equivalent question: which mammals were here in Aotearoa before Europeans arrived? This is due to the high level of consciousness about invasive and introduced species in the Aotearoa ecosystem (Black *et al.* 2021; Seabrook-Davidson and Brunton 2014) and programmes that address this threat, such as Predator Free 2050 (Department of Conservation n.d.). Furthermore, I expect that my students learnt which mammals are native to Aotearoa at school in the Cook Islands during their New Zealand curriculum–based educations (Birdsall and Kelly 2022).

This cat anecdote is a contemporary example of a process that is a continuation from early colonial times. The history of formal education throughout the Realm is one of deliberate linguicide. In Aotearoa we have done some reckoning with the physical and spiritual violence enacted on Māori children in the New Zealand education system as punishment for speaking Māori at school (see Durie 1998; Hosking *et al*. 2020). There are abundant examples in the New Zealand mainstream media exploring this history and its effects on present day mokopuna (descendants) (Re: News 2022a, 2022b).

Similar abusive practices were prevalent elsewhere in the Realm. The goal of the missionary peoples was Christianisation by any means necessary. To this end (as in Aotearoa) they did initially use the local languages in their education systems, or another of the regional languages, as occurred in Tokelau, where they used Samoan for parts of the early colonial period (Hooper *et al*. 1992). However, when the responsibility for schooling moved to the state, the goal became assimilation and recruitment of bodies as labour (Ma‘ia‘i 1957; Salesa 2017; Spoonley 2006). Hooper *et al*. (1992: 350) remark, regarding gagana Tokelau, that “if New Zealand and Samoan officials had had their way, the Tokelau language during this period would have been simply administered to what they took to be a natural death”.

In a Kuki Learning–produced video (2025) three elders discuss humiliation-based punishments they endured for speaking Māori (‘Avaiki Nui) at school in their childhood in the Cook Islands. They are of the view that this abuse is a significant factor in the shift to English. I once informally asked my students whether they had experienced this type of punishment at school for speaking Māori, and only the youngest teacher, who went to school in the 1980s, had not. There were examples from every decade from the 1950s to the 1970s of this type of abuse. As we have seen throughout the colonised world (e.g., Mackay 2024; Zwisler 2021) the colonial agenda traumatised language use for generations of parents who were therefore unable to pass on the language to their children.

CURRENT STATE OF REALM-LANGUAGE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Access to the Realm languages in the formal education system in Aotearoa is scant. There are a handful of kōhanga reo (language nest) inspired early childhood centres (see Glasgow 2019 for a discussion of Realm-language early childhood education), which are only able to serve a small proportion of Realm children. Realm languages are offered as an "object of study" at a handful of primary and secondary schools.

In the Cook Islands and Niue, children at primary and secondary school are taught predominantly in English (Nicholas 2018; B. Togahai, pers. comm., 13 May 2020). Local policy encourages the use of the local language, but at this point in time the shortage of teachers with enough language proficiency makes delivery only fulsomely possible in the Pā 'Enua of the Cook Islands and in Tokelau. Research reveals that more detail is needed on the contemporary landscape of Realm-language education opportunities.

Adult second-language acquisition is not often a straightforward endeavour. It is absolutely possible, and, in the right conditions, adults can acquire a new language to a high level of proficiency. The ideal conditions would include full-time immersion for a period of years backed up by pedagogically sound formal instruction. Learners need exposure to the literature and storytelling conventions across a wide range of modes and genres (e.g., speech, dance, music, poetry and even writing if applicable). They need opportunities to practise conversations and learn the pragmatic norms in a range of contexts.

We know that Realm people in Aotearoa experience more poverty and lower rates of home ownership. They are also are less likely to have a postsecondary school qualification than the general population (Stats NZ n.d.).

LANGUAGE CANNOT START IN OUR HOMES AT THIS TIME

The pervasive view of both the Crown and the Cook Islands community is that the family or household holds primary responsibility for promoting language use. However, the multiple marginalisations experienced by Realm people in New Zealand makes the family or household an untenable site for anchoring the language revitalisation effort. How can families who are struggling to survive be expected to overcome the hegemony of the English language on an individual basis? How can a household where no one is a proficient speaker be expected to design and implement a family-based language revitalisation programme? Worse still, how can an individual person be expected to lead this process for their family or themselves?

Language revitalisation can only be achieved as a collective endeavour. We have some extant community infrastructure to work with, for example the formal education sector, local community organisations and, to a lesser extent, churches. We should continue to feed these systems, but also begin to imagine new collaborative approaches.

A Reorientation in Progress

Now that our communities have reached this level of awareness of the shift to English, most Realm people have begun to be concerned about the vitality of their languages. We now see discourses on the importance and wide-ranging value of revitalising heritage languages, especially in settler-colonial contexts. There is much scholarly work connecting language maintenance success and improved health and wellbeing outcomes both at the community and the individual levels (Grenoble and Whaley 2021; Hallett *et al*. 2007; Matika *et al.* 2021; McCarty 2020; Thieberger 1990).

However, there are some unintended negative effects on our communities when we overemphasise the connection between language and culture. It is common to hear messaging that we must learn our languages and we must pass them on to our (potentially imaginary) children, and we must do this because the consequences of language loss are said to be catastrophic. The following is a selection of examples of this type of messaging from media and government publications.

> Language encodes culture and provides the means through which culture is shared and passed from one generation to the next. (Tāhūrangi—New Zealand Curriculum, 2024)

> A leai se gagana, ua leai se aganu'u, a leai se aganu'u, ua po le nu'u. When you lose your language, you lose your culture, and when there is no longer a living culture, darkness descends on the village. (Faiumu 2022)

> You would lose your people's view of the world, and not just of the world today but you would lose your view of how a world came to be for you. (Lane 2013)

> Ka ngaro te reo, ka ngaro tāua, pērā i te ngaro o te moa. (If the language be lost, man will be lost, as dead as the moa.) (New Zealand History 2024)

This message is likely meant as a rallying cry and has emerged in opposition to the colonial message that says that our languages have no value in the modern world and are primitive and unusable for modern life. However, the consequence of this "no language, no culture" messaging is that community members who are experiencing difficulties in their language acquisition journey may assume a burden of guilt and shame (ʻakamā, whakamā, mā) for having "failed" to uphold these values and discharge their presumed responsibilities. Community members from beginning learners to proficient speakers can experience guilt for ostensibly contributing to the loss of a culture (see Hamley 2023).

If the often-claimed notion that language *is* culture is true, then it must also be true that there is no Cook Islands Māori culture. Since almost no children in Aotearoa or Rarotonga speak Māori, it must be that our culture is already dead or nearly dead. This is clearly nonsense. Everyone uses language as part of their performance of cultural identity (Butler 2006; Eckert 2018; Joseph 2004). Which language is used is meaningful (and can sometimes expedite the transmission of the intended message), but not to the extent that to *be* Māori (or any ethnic identity) you must speak Māori, or even that to understand certain Māori concepts you must speak Māori. Paraphrasing Jakobson (1959), languages differ by what they *must* say, not by what they *can* say. The idea that modern Cook Islanders (and Indigenous people of this moana (ocean) generally), with their storytelling, poetic, costume-designing, dancing, singing and rhythmically virtuosic cultural skills, cannot find ways to talk about these cultural phenomena in English (or French, or Spanish…) is as ridiculous as it is insulting. If the worst were to happen and we get to a point that there are no more living speakers of Māori, this will not mean there are no more Māori people. As discussed above, there are many well-evidenced benefits for engaging in language revitalisation, but the claim that language *is* culture is both false and harmful.

What a language learner perceives as their own failure is heavily influenced by the attitude of language speakers toward language learners. Unfortunately, we have some harmful discourse norms to contend with here in the Realm of New Zealand as well. In a pattern observed in most language revitalisation contexts—and, in fact, most language contexts—prescriptivism and purity messages are common (see Beal *et al*. 2023 for an overview). Blame for language shift or change is often placed on learners, especially young people. Learners are accused of being lazy and/or disinterested. Scholarship with Realm people in Aotearoa consistently reports that young people place high value on their community languages and desire to learn them (Puna 2013; Samu *et al*. 2019; Taumoefolau *et al*. 2002). Learners can be criticised harshly for perceived errors or lack of prowess. This environment creates a precarious state from which to embark on a language-learning journey and can be prohibitive to participation in language revitalisation efforts. Taken in concert with the economic marginalisation experienced by community members, continued underresourcing by the state and the general challenge of adult language acquisition, the challenge is not trivial, to say the least.

'E KARERE NŌ TE AU MOKOPUNA
(A MESSAGE FOR THE DESCENDANTS)

This is a message for our people about language-learning responsibility.

If you are an Indigenous adult who does not speak your community language or is struggling in your language-learning journey, did you decide which languages were used around you when you were under 5 years old? Did you decide which language was used for instruction in your schooling? Did you decide where you lived or where to be born? You find yourself in the difficult position of being an adult learner because of factors and pressures over which you had no control. It's not your fault. See Nicholas (2019) on the *Vocal Fries* podcast for further discussion on this theme.

It is difficult to learn your language as an adult. It is not a magical process accessible to you via your genes. It's a project that takes time, money, energy and resilience. You likely live in a system which that already uses most of your time, money, energy and resilience. Nevertheless, the benefits of engaging in community-language revitalisation are worth it.

TŌ MĀTOU PIRI'ANGA KI AOTEAROA—NĀ MUA TĀTOU
(TRANSINDIGENEITY AS THE WAY FORWARD)

Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) is seen by many scholars as the de facto constitution of the bicultural nation-state of New Zealand (e.g., Jones 2013). Although the application of this covenant is hotly contested by both signatory parties, there is little confusion as to the identity of those parties. They are the Māori people of Aotearoa as tangata whenua and the Crown as represented by the Government of New Zealand. Under this system, all Pacific migrants to New Zealand are there as tangata Tiriti because their status is issued by the Crown, not by tangata whenua, as is the case for all migrants to New Zealand that came after the British colonisation began, including Pākehā (British settlers and their descendants). Under this framework there is no marking of the Indigenous status of the Realm peoples. With New Zealand now a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2008) there is a legal framework which provides a model for the Realm languages and people to be viewed as Indigenous, but meaningful progress in this direction has yet to be made, either legally or socially.

Despite violent colonial occupation, the Māori Aotearoa language revitalisation programme is world-leading (Benton 1981, 2015). If the New Zealand settler state is a hostile force against language revitalisation, perhaps a more fruitful collaboration can be found with tangata whenua. Pacific peoples have an additional relationship to Aotearoa that is based on whakapapa, the genealogical relationship between the Indigenous peoples of Island Oceania and the Māori of Aotearoa. Language revitalisation in collaboration with the wider family group is a sound but politically complicated idea. The hegemonic assumption of power by the colonial state demands that Indigenous peoples relate primarily to it, not to each other, encouraging lateral violence. However, increasing numbers of both Māori and Pasifika thinkers are centring this ancestral relationship in their ideas of trans-Indigenous solidarity (Hau'ofa 1993; Mar 2016; Samu *et al*. 2019; Te Punga Somerville 2012).

Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo and Te Aho Matua are the kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa (Māori medium preschool and school education) curriculums. They explicitly include the whole whānau in each child's educational journey. They take some of the strengths of the settler education system and make them Māori by incorporating traditional knowledge from te ao Māori tawhito (precontact times) as well as te ao Māori o te ao hurihuri (contemporary adaptions and innovations).

Kōhanga reo started in people's living rooms, which is where I, along with the rest of my Māori 'Avaiki Nui family, began my poly-Māori education. Kōhanga models of early childhood education exist for the Realm languages (Glasgow 2019) and should remain a tactical priority. In a time where the New Zealand government has taken an even more antagonistic turn toward the Indigenous peoples of its Realm, perhaps we "Realmers" should pursue transindigeneity and whakapapa-based collaboration more deliberately than we already do. The numbers are on our side.

Ka ora te reo ka ora te 'iti tangata

When the language is well the people are well

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NOTES

1. The codes used in this article for the languages and language varieties (dialects) are from Glottolog (Hammarström *et al*. 2024).
2. NZSL is an important and official language of New Zealand that is marginalised in serious ways and deserves a higher level of support, especially for families with deaf or hard-of-hearing children.
3. We are using the Glottolog codes in this section to disambiguate the confusion that exits with respect to the languages of ʻAvaiki Nui (the Cook Islands). For example, the term "Rarotongan" can be used to refer to i) all the languages of the Cook Islands, ii) all the East Polynesian languages of the Cook Islands, iii) all the varieties of Southern Cook Islands Māori, or iv) just the variety of Southern Cook Islands Māori of the island of Rarotonga. Likewise, "Cook Islands Māori" can refer to the same four possibilities. This disambiguation is not needed when discussing vagahau Niue or gagana Tokelau, as the numbers of languages in those places are not usually contested.
4. In the context of determining whether two varieties are separate languages or dialects of the same language, "lumpers" are more likely to categorise varieties as dialects, whereas splitters are more likely to categorise them as separate languages.
5. As of the 2023 census 18.6% of Māori Aotearoa people report proficiency with te reo Māori (Paewai 2024). This is a similar level of language maintenance to that of the Tokelau community in Aotearoa.
6. Analyses presented here were collated in a Stats NZ Data Lab; the output was subjected to their confidentiality procedures and final output checked by Stats NZ before their release. The results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the IDI, which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI please visit https:// www.stats.govt.nz./integrated-data/.
7. The large number of redundancies at Stats NZ in 2024 is likely the primary reason we have not been able to access the most up-to-date data (Whyte 2024).
8. *Felis catus* is a popular companion animal in both New Zealand proper and the Cook Islands and poses a serious threat to native bird populations. In Aotearoa there has been controversy about measures to reduce or control cat populations (see Kikillus *et al*. 2017), and since people in the Cook Islands watch the New Zealand news on television they are likely aware of this discourse as it applies to Aotearoa.

GLOSSARY

The terms in this glossary are Māori Aotearoa unless otherwise stated.

ʻakamā, whakamā, mā	shame or shyness (many Polynesian languages)
ʻenua kāinga	homeland (Māori ʻAvaiki Nui (Cook Islands Māori))
gagana Tokelau	the Tokelauan language (Tokelauan)
kaitiaki	caregiver, guardian
kiore	rat (Māori ʻAvaiki Nui)

kiore ngiao	cat (Māori 'Avaiki Nui)
kōhanga reo	Māori medium early childhood education centres (lit. language nest)
kōrero	story, speech, discussion
kura kaupapa	Māori medium primary school
leo Wale	the Pukapukan language (Pukapukan)
manuhiri	guest
moana	ocean
mokopuna	grandchild, descendant generally
puaka	pig (Māori 'Avaiki Nui)
puaka 'oro 'enua	horse (Māori 'Avaiki Nui)
puaka toro	cow, bovine (Māori 'Avaiki Nui)
tangata moana	Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Ocean
tangata Tiriti	non-Māori people who live in New Zealand proper, lit. Treaty people
tangata whenua	Indigenous people of a particular place, in this case Aotearoa (New Zealand proper)
te ao Māori o te ao hurihuri	the modern and ever-changing Māori world
te ao Māori tawhito	the traditional Māori world
te reo Māori	the Māori language of Aotearoa (Māori Aotearoa)
vagahau Niue	the Niuean language (Niuean)
whakapapa	heritage, ancestry, genealogy.
whānau	close kinship group

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