

**ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL ABUSE IN STATE CARE
AND IN THE CARE OF FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS**

WITNESS STATEMENT OF FA'AFETE TAITO

DATED: 24 SEPTEMBER 2019

Introduction

[1] My name is Fa'afete Taito. I am a Samoan New Zealander and I have prepared this statement for the Royal Commission about my experiences of abuse and neglect as a state ward during the 1970s.

[2] My parents moved to New Zealand from Samoa in the 1950s with the hope that they could earn money to provide a good life for their children, to enable us to have a good education, and to send money back home to Samoa.

The Involvement of the State

[3] I was raised by my mother and father. I had three older sisters and one younger sister. My father was very involved in the Church and we spent every Sunday attending church and helping out afterwards. My Mum loved me very much and I was always close with her. My father, like many Samoan men of his generation, struggled with the broader cultural forces at play and the challenges of trying to raise his family in New Zealand society while maintaining Samoan values. My father experienced strict discipline at home himself when he was younger so he saw that as a normal way to parent us.

[4] When I was about 12 years old, I started running away from home when I could tell my Dad was in a bad mood and I was in for a hiding. As I was the only boy, I received more hidings than my sisters. I would skip school and eventually be caught by a social worker.

[5] The social worker would take me home and say to my Dad that I had told them I was being beaten. I felt the social workers didn't believe me but thought I was just acting up. When

I was returned home, my Mum would make me kneel in front of my Dad to apologise. He would go and get the leather belt and would beat me with it until I had giant welts all over my body. My Mum would try to protect me by covering me with her body and asking my Dad to please stop. At times he would but most times he would carry on, with my Mum copping a few belts as well.

[6] This pattern of me being beaten by my father, running away, and then being beaten when I was returned continued. I was brought before the Children's Board at Hampton Court in Auckland city. I remember there would be two Judges, social workers, priests, and members of the Police "J team" (juvenile delinquent team). I quickly became well-known to them.

[7] At the Children's Board, the Judge would lecture me, saying that truancy is bad and education is good and that I must learn to stay at home and go to school when I was supposed to.

[8] At school, I became more violent myself getting into fights with other kids. Looking back, I suppose I thought violence was normal because of the regular hidings I was getting at home. I attended Marist Intermediate and got into trouble after getting caught trying to break into a safe in the administration block. I had seen a TV programme called "It takes a thief" about safe crackers and wanted to try it.

[9] I got sent to Owairaka for the first time when I was 14. There was a court case where my older sister attended. My Mum wanted to come but my father forbade her. I was reading the court file of the social worker and it said that I had been adopted. I never knew that I was adopted and asked my sister. She was annoyed that and said that Mum should have told me by now.

[10] Until then, I grew up believing that my parents were my biological parents. My biological mother was my father's (whangai) sister but she gave birth to me out of wedlock so she was sent from Samoa to New Zealand before she gave birth. I learned later that my (adoptive) father told her she would be leaving the baby with them and would return to

Samoa to finish her nursing studies. Later in life she told me how much this pained her and how hard it was for her to leave me behind.

Life at Owairaka and Beyond

[11] When I first got taken to Owairaka, I had no idea what was happening. I was crying in the van and tried to ask the social worker why I was going to this place and not home and he said “it’s coz you’re a fucking state ward now so shut up!” At the receiving office of the secure unit at Owairaka, I stood there on the line while they were doing paperwork. I didn’t know what I was meant to do or whether I should say something. One of the workers who took me into secure on my first day pointed out a Māori boy and said “that’s the kingpin. If you don’t behave here, you’ll get a good hiding from him.” I didn’t know how long I was going to this place or what it was. The staff were mostly Pakeha and I could not relate to them.

[12] One of the worst things was not knowing (because I was not told or was not told in a way I could understand) what I was supposed to do to stay out of trouble. I remember we were meant to fold up our sheets and blankets in the morning before room inspection. I folded my sheets and blankets on the first day and waited. The Pakeha worker came in and threw it all on the ground. He said “what is that coconut boy?” and showed me another boys room. He pointed to folded blankets which I thought looked just like mine. I went back and re-folded mine again. He came in and threw it on the ground again. He got the other boy to show me how to fold it so that the red stripe on the blanket could be seen when it was folded. He then threw it on the ground again and said “now you do it, coconut boy.”

[13] At Owairaka I learned how to steal cars, how to pick locks, and I was introduced to cannabis for the first time.

[14] I wasn’t sexually abused at Owairaka but I experienced a lot of physical violence. The workers there allowed kids to bully and assault other kids. They allowed intimidation and for the weak to become slaves to the bigger boys because it suited them. I also think, for some of them, seeing fights appealed to their sense of humour as a form of entertainment.

[15] I remember one day the kingpin attacked me in the activities room. He hit me over the head with a bat. There was an officer sitting right there so at first I didn't fight back because I wasn't sure what would happen if I did. I saw the officer sitting there, smiling and watching and realised I need to look after myself. I fought back and it was only when I was on top of the other boy that I was pulled off by officers and sent back to secure.

[16] I was often pushed around and abused by staff and racially insulted. I found the tricks and lack of communication hard to deal with. The first time I was in secure I didn't know that in the mornings they let you out for a short time to run around the yard. This wasn't explained to me. I was just unlocked and told to start running. I ran around and around the yard, not knowing how long this was going to keep going for. I could see the guards drinking coffee and playing cards. When I got tired I stopped and they then yelled at me to keep running.

[17] One of the guards came out and opened the door of another cell at the end of the yard. He didn't say anything to me so I kept running. As I ran past the cell I realised it was a shower and there was a towel on the door. The guard then told me if I wanted a shower to hurry up because the water would be turning off soon. I did not know the showers were on timer and he had turned it on without telling me. I went in and quickly tried to have a shower but the water turned off while I was in there. I was furious and felt powerless and angry that they were deliberately keeping things from me.

[18] After being at Owairaka the first time, St Paul's College refused to take me and so did Mt Albert Grammar school so I ended up at Seddon High School in Western Springs. I was put into a foster home with a social worker. I was ok in the first term. Then I burgled the school and was sent back to Owairaka.

[19] In the third term I was allowed back to Seddon High but I was sent to stay in a halfway house because no other foster families would take me. There were gang members living at the halfway house. I wanted to hang with them so would go and try to hang around them, I got a few hidings from them.

[20] I got kicked out of high school for burglary when I was 14. At that time, it was illegal to suspend or expel kids from school who were under 15. In 1976 the Education Act was amended and I became the first child under the new legislation to receive an exemption order. I had a letter I kept with me for if I was stopped by authorities to show that I did not have to be at school.

[21] I also had two stints at the borstal in Waikeria. That was a whole other level to what I had experienced at Owairaka. In Waikeria I met a lot of the kids that had been in Owairaka with me. The majority of them had joined the Mongrel Mob and Black Power and I was asked to join the Mongrel Mob by one of my mates that had been at Owairaka with me. I had heard a little bit about the King Cobras in Ponsonby so I wasn't sure about joining the Mongrel Mob. Also, I wasn't really keen on the bulldog or the sieg heil ideas. I told him I would think about it.

[22] Waikeria was much more violent and rough but Owairaka was the worst because it was the beginning of the pathway that I felt I was set upon. Owairaka introduced me to a lot of things I had never encountered before. When I look back on that period of my life, I see the state gifted me the gang lifestyle.

[23] In between times in custody I was spending a lot of time on the streets with other kids who were in similar situations to me. We would find abandoned houses to stay in until the Police J-team came after us. For awhile we crashed at a house in Ponsonby which was next door to the Polynesian Panthers so I got involved with them, delivering pamphlets and met many great leaders. In winter, we would stay under Grafton Bridge with cardboard boxes under us to sleep on and we would pinch blankets from Auckland hospital to stay warm.

[24] When I was about 16 I starting hanging out with others in Ponsonby who were the beginnings of the King Cobras. The King Cobras started again in 1978 and I joined and at the end of 1978.

[25] In 1979 I was sent to do my first lag at Mt Eden Corrections Facility. I was 17 years old and a fully patched member of the King Cobras.

Gang lifestyle

[26] From age 17, I was part of the King Cobra gang. I spent 12 years as a patched member. I left the gang in 1990 but continued on the criminal pathway I was by now well accustomed to. The criminal underworld and lifestyle had become part of who I was. I could not see any other life for me.

[27] A lot of the boys who were in the boys' homes with me had established themselves as senior in the hierarchy of the major gangs. This made my criminal dealings easier because I had such a strong network of connections stemming directly from our time together at Owairaka. They knew me and would deal with me because of that trust and shared understanding. This meant that I continued with a life of crime for many years and was completely immersed in the criminal underworld in Auckland.

[28] In 1990s, I did a 7 year stint prison sentence. I got out in 2000, but was sentenced to 8 years' imprisonment in 2001 for drug offending. I served those sentences at Paremuremo prison in Auckland.

[29] I got out of prison in 2006. I began to want to change but taking a different pathway seemed impossible to start with. In 2009 I started to change slowly but it took some time. By the end of 2009, I realised I had been using methamphetamine for 10 years and it was starting to have a big impact on my life. I had used on and off for 10 years but was always focused on drugs in terms of the business, not the drug itself. I knew I had to get off it and to get off the drugs I knew I had to walk away from the criminal world altogether.

[30] By this stage, I was more focused on my partner and my children. It took me awhile to come to the realisation that I would have to leave the criminal world altogether to fully make the change.

[31] In the end, I left and went straight for my partner. My partner has been by my side for 29 years and I wanted to make sure I was around to live my life with her and for my children. Between us we have 6 children and I wanted to be there for them.

[32] It was incredibly hard coming off drugs with no money and no support. I lived with my sister who was unwell so that I could take care of her. It took me 10 months to get over the withdrawal symptoms.

[33] In 2010 my partner told me I needed to do something with my time. She encouraged me to study as she was worried if I had too much time on my hands I would end up going back to my old ways. I went to the University of Auckland and started the bridging course which was the beginning of my new academic career.

[34] I have now completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Auckland with a double major in Sociology and Māori.

Long term impacts

[35] With time, and through my studies, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my life and I made peace with my adoptive father and what happened in my early childhood years.

[36] There are three long term impacts that are important context to trying to understand the broader issues of abuse and neglect in care and the devastating impacts they can have for people:

- (a) *Identity* – by removing me from my family, I lost part of my identity. To be taken away from my mother at such a young age had a profound and lifelong impact on me. My mother was everything to me in terms of being Samoan, being Christian, being my family. The impact was even greater as there was no family meeting or explanation of why I was being removed. I remember when I was first being taken from secure to the blocks at Owairaka I asked the guard if there were any Samoans up there. He said there were no Samoans and asked me what I was. I said I was Samoan and he said no you're not and asked me if I was a New Zealand citizen. I said I was and he said "well you're a New Zealander then." From then on when I was asked I would say I was a New Zealander. Prior to going into care, Christianity was also a big part of who I was. I lost my faith once I went into care. Being Samoan and being Christian were most of what I

knew previously. I came out of care being tough and being violent. That was my new identity.

- (b) *Pathway to crime and prison* – my family and I were not offered support at the time I was taken into care. Instead, I was removed and placed in an environment where I was moved closer towards a gang lifestyle. This was partly through my introduction to crimes and offending and drugs at Owairaka and then being placed in close proximity to older, hardened criminals at the halfway house, at Waikeria and at Mt Eden Corrections Facility as a young man. The number of gang members who began in boys' homes illustrates the strong link between early abuse and neglect and a life of crime.

- (c) *Losing the ability to love* – the world of state care and the gangs takes away your ability to love and care. My mother loved me but I lost the protective power of that love when I was removed and made a state ward. I learned that interactions with others should be aggressive, antagonistic, violent, and focused on trying to get one over the other person. As I was developing, having lost the ability to love, I began to create my own versions of love. I grew to love violence. It was something I knew, I understood it, I was good at it, it got me places and it got me what I wanted. So I loved it. Losing the ability to love is a profound and deep loss and one that many men in my situation have also experienced. It is compounded through the intergenerational impact because we did not know how to love our partner and kids in a healthy way. For me, it has only been since I've left the gang life altogether that I have slowly been able to rebuild and re-learn what it means both to love, and to truly be loved. I wish my younger self could have learned that much earlier.

The Pasefika experience

[37] My story is not unique. Many families also struggled with the culture clash in moving to New Zealand. My parents were part of that first wave of Samoan families that came to New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s who experienced a big culture shock. In Samoa, life was organised and regulated in accordance with the village structure and with oversight from the

village council. Everyone knew everyone in the village and there was a shared understanding of the boundaries of appropriate behaviour.

[38] In New Zealand, there was a shift from the collective to the individual. While many Samoan families lived in close proximity in Auckland, the village structure disintegrated. At school, children were taught in an individual way. Money became the way to reflect status. Many Samoan families struggled with the cultural changes and a new way of life in New Zealand.

[39] Looking back at it now, I can see the struggles my parents and other Pacific families had adapting to urban life. In New Zealand, the Churches became the village. Most families would go there, not just on Sundays but it was the centre of social life as well. The Minister and his family were very important and the Church community became the focal point amongst the urban sprawl.

[40] The structure of the family unit also changed. While back home in Samoa, the matai or chief was head of the village, in New Zealand the father became the head of the family unit. This actually fitted much better with the New Zealand patriarchal structure but it was a big change for families. The father, as head of the house, became more powerful and everyone had to listen to him and obey him.

[41] Many Pacific island families wanted their children to learn English to get ahead. In my family, I was never taught the fa'a Samoan language, only my sister was. We learned English and took on Palagi ways. When family would come over from Samoa, there was a big culture difference between their kids and us. We would mock them for being fobs and not being able to speak English.

[42] Gentrification took hold especially in the 1980s and many families were pushed out to South Auckland and into marginalised areas. Pacific families were focused on earning money to send back home and to contribute to Church but were not equipped to succeed in the Palagi capitalist environment that was thriving in New Zealand. Our people didn't have their head around what money represented and what they could do with it. They were vulnerable to

Palagi institutions offering loans that saddled them with high interest debt and did not have the skills to navigate interest rates and investments. They did not benefit from economic growth during that period but found themselves mortgaged to the hilt in South Auckland.

[43] These societal changes were amplified by the racism that was alive and well in New Zealand during this time. Authority figures: teachers, police, social workers and others were predominantly white New Zealanders and many openly looked down on Pacific Islanders. The Dawn Raids exposed the overt racism that many of us experienced on a daily basis.

[44] A lot of us New Zealand born Samoans felt lost in this new society. We were not accepted by our own culture and we were definitely not accepted by New Zealand Palagi culture. The King Cobras represented a new identity for those who felt they did not belong.

[45] Violence within the home can be seen as a symptom of struggling with the culture shock and dislocation experienced by many Pacific Island families. This does not lessen the impact that abuse had on children and the intergenerational problems with family violence but the context is important to fully understand the problem. In any event, removing children from a violent home and placing them into an emotionally and physically violent institution cannot be said to be in anyone's best interests.

Hopes for this Inquiry

[46] I believe it is very important for those from the Pasefika community to be involved with this Inquiry. I can speak as a Samoan man but there are many others, including women and those from other Pacific Islands who have a story to tell as well.

[47] I think some people of Pacific Island heritage can be too deferential towards New Zealand. Although it is true that New Zealand has offered many opportunities and a better life for some of our people, this does not mean we cannot speak out about what has happened.

[48] I remember during the dawn raid area that some families blamed other families and thought it was their fault for not having up to date visas. The sentiment was "this country has been good to us so we should be good." While that is true to some extent, it can excuse the

actions of the New Zealand government who at times targeted Samoan and other Pacific Island communities through racist and exploitative policies and practices. Our people came to New Zealand and worked hard in factory jobs that New Zealanders didn't want, only to then be subjected to discrimination and racism.

[49] Being part of this Inquiry does not bring shame on me or my family. It is a way of explaining how the state failed us and the devastating impacts that has had for families, communities and broader society.

[50] I am speaking out today in the hope that others will feel that they can come forward and share their stories. New Zealand needs to hear the truth about what happened during those years so that we can begin to heal and move forward.

Signed:

Date: