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**Contemporary Ritual-Makers: A Study of
Independent Celebrants in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Social Anthropology

at Massey University, New Zealand

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2011

Abstract

Ritual-makers' roles as religious specialists with unique expertise on the rituals of their particular societies' religions and cultures have been studied closely by anthropologists, but less well understood is how ritual-makers operate in contemporary western societies, taking into account their postmodern characteristics and influences, increasing heterogeneity, and wide diversity of spiritual and cultural traditions, beliefs, influences, and practices. This study re-examines what being a ritual-maker means, based on participant observation and oral histories with independent celebrants in New Zealand.

Independent celebrants are one group of contemporary ritual-makers who ritualise in private contexts, operating as functionaries who are experts in the processes of ritual-making rather than religious specialists. Independent celebrants' primary focus is to devise rituals that reflect the significance and meanings their clients attribute to life transitions they choose to mark ritually. There are approximately two thousand independent celebrants in New Zealand facilitating commonly marked rites of passage, including half of all marriages and an estimated similar proportion of funerals, as well as a broad range of other ceremonies including civil unions, namings, ceremonies of commitment, remembrance ceremonies marking death and loss, healing ceremonies, and seasonal celebrations. Individualism is central to these independent celebrants' values, attitudes, rituals, and practices. In responding to clients' needs and expectations, celebrants create rituals which enact and convey both the continuity of traditions according to culturally-determined expectations along with current personalised meanings.

Growing secularism was partly behind the emergence of this group of celebrants from the late 1970s onwards, as civil marriage and secular funeral celebrants responded to demands for non-religious alternatives to the mainly Christian denominational ceremonies predominant at that time. However, in examining spirituality as it relates to independent celebrants now, rites of passage can be seen as being often richly spiritual, reflecting the personal spiritualities of clients and to an extent those of the individual celebrants with whom clients choose to work. Within

celebrants' dynamic ritual-making practices, these ritual-makers take an active role in changing ritual traditions as they go about their work of honouring and accommodating the diverse and changing spiritualities of New Zealanders.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the celebrant community who have enthusiastically supported me in this research. It has been a privilege to listen and to discuss with you the work you care about so deeply. Thank you to the interview participants and everyone else who generously gave time to share your experiences and knowledge, including: Pinky Agnew, Bernie Allen, Marian Barnes, Rhys Bean, Julia Cameron, Lorraine Chave, Lynne Ewart, Janelle Fletcher, Katherine Fraser, Carol Galloway, Barbara Goodman, Hilary Hudson, Mary Hancock, Vivienne Hill, Bill Logan, Barrie Mason, Dally Messenger, Eddie McMenemy, Rod Murphy, Pratima Nand, Ruth Pink, Marie Preston, Heather Scott-Worsley, Rachel Selby, Terri Shanks, Trish Tuckey, and Sheryl Wilson.

Mary, thank you for the inspiring training in celebrant studies which led me towards this path of study. To the Wellington Branch of Celebrants Association of New Zealand (CANZ) and the national representatives of the CANZ and Celebrants Guild, thank you for your support. Thanks to Gillian and the team at the Oral History Centre, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, who were excited with my idea from the beginning and accepted the recordings into New Zealand's collection. Thank you to my wise and patient supervisors, Associate Professor Kathryn Rountree and Dr Mary Nash. Linda Pears, thank you for your assistance with proofreading. Andrew, Scott, Matthew and all my family, thank you for your interest, support, and encouragement.

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