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**TAKING THE SPIRITS SERIOUSLY:
NEO-SHAMANISM AND CONTEMPORARY SHAMANIC
HEALING IN NEW ZEALAND**

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

**Doctor of Philosophy
in
Social Anthropology**

at
Massey University
Auckland, New Zealand

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2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a phenomenological and comparative study of contemporary shamanic healing and neo-Shamans in New Zealand. It considers neo-Shamanism as a complex of spiritual practices situated within a broad but identifiable cosmological sensibility, and as variable systems of healing. The relationships between neo-Shamans and some other new religious movements in New Zealand, and the similarities or differences between the practices of other neo- and indigenous shamans within a global context are examined. The discussion sits within a larger health and healing discourse about the relationships between neo-Shamanism, complementary and alternative medicine, and biomedicine amongst the medically pluralistic culture of New Zealand. It describes contemporary Māori healing as a possible variant of shamanism within local and global contexts; in particular, it examines the relationships between (some) neo-Shamans in New Zealand and (some) Māori healers.

I argue that modern Western shamans are synthesising and creating multiple 21st century forms of neo-Shamanisms, and that neo-Shamans in New Zealand are part of this emerging (re)construction process. However, neo-Shamans in New Zealand are also unique in that they live and practise in this land, which has led to them creating new spiritual identities as neo-Shamanic practitioners in New Zealand. I suggest that neo-Shamans in New Zealand do many of the things that indigenous shamans have always done and continue to do (such as entering altered states of consciousness), albeit within a particular modern Western cultural context. Moreover, I contend that neo-Shamans are challenging orthodox Western science as they engage in a sacred science that ‘takes the spirits seriously’ (Blain, 2002:74).

Secondly, I argue that many practitioners of complementary and alternative medicine consciously or unconsciously incorporate what might be regarded as shamanistic techniques and tools into their work, creating fusion models of healing. My observation is that the importation of shamanic healing practices into the West has contributed to these processes. I suggest that while at least some contemporary healers might be considered ‘shamans’ in disguise, nomenclature issues around whether or not they should be defined as shamans are less important than the fact that their healing practices have widened to include implicitly or explicitly a spiritual dimension.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many have played a role in the birthing of this thesis. In particular, I give thanks to those who have generously contributed to my research as participants, sharing their shamanic and healing stories with me. It has been a privilege to sit with you in circle; your warmth and kindness have nurtured and inspired me.

The time I spent with the Māori healers has been a rich and humbling experience. Several Māori scholars and friends have advised and guided me during this part of my fieldwork. I am deeply grateful to you all. Nga mihi nui me te aroha nui ki a koutou, kia ora mō ō koutou awahina, me te manaakitanga hoki.

I thank my academic supervisors, Dr Kathryn Rountree and Dr Graeme Macrae, who have patiently encouraged and challenged me throughout this time. I am appreciative of their tactful and insightful guidance. The level of commitment the supervisory relationship demands is considerable, and I am privileged to have had their intellectual understandings, wisdom and experience that have enhanced the final product immeasurably.

A doctoral journey over several years must inevitably include pivotal life events and challenges; mine has been no different from many others in this respect. I acknowledge my extended family, and the passing of my brother and my mother during this time. I celebrate my daughters, Karla and Stephanie, and their partners Karim and Ravi. I give heartfelt thanks to my partner, Gavan, who has supported me in more ways than I can say over the last six years (including financial support), and has tolerated the times I have been unavailable or distracted.

Many dear friends have vicariously walked this path with me. You have cheered me on, listened, asked questions and shared with me on all levels. Thank you. In particular, I acknowledge and honour Anouk whose gentle midwifery skills have helped me in terms of my personal process throughout this time, and Julia who has helped me with formatting the final product.

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