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

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of the requirements for the degree of

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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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.



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