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**THE WATER OR THE WAVE?  
TOWARD A CROSS-CULTURAL ECOLOGY  
OF UNDERSTANDING  
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

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## **ABSTRACT**

One of the critical challenges of our times is how different cultures can communicate with each other on issues to do with the environment. At the root of this is how those cultures understand not just each other, but their own cultural relationships with Nature. The thesis examines this issue using an approach that is cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. It does so by assessing philosophical foundations within worldviews, ranging from an emphasis on the deterministic whole over the parts (monism) to one of reduction of the whole to the parts (dualism). In contrast, a nondual attitude supports a holistic basis for approaching wholes as dynamic patterns of interconnections. In this thesis, a nondual approach is offered as a way that enables and encourages open and dialogical understanding across cultural worldviews on environmental issues.

The thesis also explores cultural aspects of this challenge as it is expressed in the meeting of indigenous peoples and moderns. The ‘ritual’ cooperative basis of societies that seek cohesion among their members can be compared with the overtly competitive ‘game’-like modern society based on a pathology of continuous economic growth and rights-based individualism. It is increasingly obvious that the accelerated pace of change and scale of economic development is outstripping Nature’s capacity for renewal. Underpinning moderns’ drive for ‘development’ is a mechanistic attitude to the environment which is expressed through reductionist methodology. In contrast, the emerging awareness within Western science of ecosystems as complex, adaptive, self-organising systems suggests a more respectful attitude toward Nature. This awareness is also apparent among many indigenous cultures, although their understanding extends beyond secular relations to assert a strong spiritual interdependency of humans and the Earth.

The damming of the Whanganui River, New Zealand, for hydroelectric power development provides a case study for illustrating the key themes explored throughout the thesis. This development has had profound effects on the indigenous Whanganui Maori, whose existence is inextricably interwoven with the river’s life. The environmental planning system in New Zealand now requires developers to consider not only ecological consequences, but to consult with Maori. However, such consultation often falls short of realising an openness to dialogue aimed at a cross-cultural ecology of understanding. Essential to that understanding is a deeper awareness of one’s own worldview.

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	i
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	ii
<b>TABLES AND FIGURES</b> .....	ix
<b>CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION: ENTERING THE STREAM</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER TWO – MONISM, DUALISM AND NONDUALISM</b> .....	12
INTRODUCTION .....	12
METHODS.....	13
MONISM – the One .....	15
DUALISM – the Many.....	17
How does monism look from the perspective of dualism?.....	20
How does dualism look from the perspective of monism?.....	22
THE DIALECTICAL DILEMMA.....	26
The Dialectic Approach to Addressing Pluralism .....	29
COMPLEMENTARY POLARITY.....	30
NONDUALISM – neither the One nor the Many.....	33
Spider’s Web: Holism in Metaphor.....	43
Recapitulation .....	45
SYMBOLS .....	45
<b>CHAPTER THREE – RITUAL AND GAME</b> .....	49
INTRODUCTION.....	49
LÉVI-STRAUSS’ RITUAL AND GAME .....	49
Ritual: The Xavante Log Race .....	51
Game: Modern Sport.....	52
INDIGENOUS ‘RITUAL’ AND MODERNITY AS ‘GAME’ .....	53
Ritual: Indigenous Kosmology .....	55
Indigenous Identity: Roles That Define .....	62
Man of Nature: Living Within Natural Limits.....	66

The Communal Spirit of Medieval Ritual.....	69
Ritualism and the Economic Game.....	73
The Birth of the Modern Rights-Bearing Individual.....	76
The Competitive Game Within Ritual Culture.....	80
THE BETRAYAL OF MODERN IDEALS .....	82
The Individual Versus Society.....	82
From Citizen to Groups.....	83
Dependency and the Modern Institution.....	88
Mass Man and Totalitarianism.....	91
Loss of Limits: Loss of Roots.....	93
Revisiting ‘Individualism’: Reinstating the ‘Person’.....	95
Summary – Table 1: Monism, Dualism and Nondualism in Ritual and Game.....	98
CONCLUSION: The Ecological Concern.....	99
<b>CHAPTER FOUR – THE CULTURE OF ECOLOGY AND THE ECOLOGY OF CULTURE.....</b>	<b>101</b>
INTRODUCTION: The ‘Culture of Ecology’ and the ‘Ecology of Culture’.....	101
<b><i>PART ONE – COMMUNITY AND ECOSYSTEM ECOLOGY.....</i></b>	<b>102</b>
SEMINAL PAPERS IN COMMUNITY ECOLOGY.....	102
Clements’ Superorganism Concept.....	102
Gleason’s Individualistic Concept.....	105
The Dialectical Division in Community Ecology.....	107
INVESTIGATING ECOSYSTEMS.....	108
Tansley and the Ecosystem Concept.....	108
Lindeman’s Trophic-Dynamic Aspect of Ecosystems.....	111
The Odum Brothers and Systems Ecology.....	113
Holism and Reductionism in Ecosystem Ecology.....	117
EQUILIBRIUM ECOLOGY.....	119
Cybernetics and Feedback Loops.....	119
Homeostasis and the Steady State.....	121
Ecosystems as Cybernetic Systems .....	123

QUESTIONING EQUILIBRIUM .....	125
Holling's Resilience .....	125
May's Chaotic Dynamics .....	126
Equilibrium or Non-Equilibrium? Implications for Human-Nature Relationships.....	127
<b><i>PART TWO – SYSTEMS SCIENCES AND COMPLEX ECOSYSTEMS</i></b> .....	133
SYSTEMS PHILOSOPHY .....	133
Time in Perspective: The Second Law of Thermodynamics.....	134
Bertalanffy's Theory of Open Systems .....	135
Order Out of Chaos: Prigogine's Dissipative Structures.....	137
CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY.....	141
Chaos Theory.....	141
Fractals: Patterns Without Repetition.....	142
The Sciences of Complexity.....	144
Organised Complexity: Kauffman's Self-Organisation.....	146
The Edge of Chaos .....	148
Hierarchy Theory and Emergence .....	150
Complex Adaptive Systems.....	154
Ecosystems as Complex Systems: Implications for 'Management' .....	157
ELEPHANTS AND ECOSYSTEMS: A Plurality of Perspectives.....	163
UNCERTAINTY AND PLURALISM IN ECOLOGY.....	165
<b>CHAPTER FIVE – 'SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT' OR 'SUSTAINED DEVELOPMENT'?</b> .....	170
INTRODUCTION: The Insidious Character of Development.....	170
Recapitulation: Ritual and Game.....	171
GOETHE'S <i>FAUST</i> : "Faust the Developer" .....	172
THE 'PROGRESSIVE WORLDVIEW': The Gifts of the Jews.....	176
'ENFRAMING' THE 'OTHER': Non-Human Nature; Non-Western Cultures.....	179
WHEN 'CIVILISED MAN' MEETS 'PRIMITIVE MAN' .....	182
Indigenous as Pre-Modern Self: 'Contemporary Ancestor'.....	183
Indigenous as Sociobiological and Anthropological 'Object' .....	186
Indigenous as Romanticised Hero: The Ecologically Noble Savage.....	192
DEVELOPMENT AND THE STIGMA OF 'UNDERDEVELOPMENT' .....	200



THREE RESPONSES OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES TO DEVELOPMENT .....	205
‘Good Subjects’: The Melting Pot of Assimilation.....	207
‘Bad Subjects’: Retaliation and Ethnic Backlash.....	211
<i>Review</i> : ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ as Dialectical Extremes.....	215
<i>Insert</i> : Development, Diversity and the Dis/Guise of Tolerance.....	218
Self-Expression and Renewal: ‘Non-Subjects’.....	220
DEVELOPMENT AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS .....	227
‘SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT’: Sustaining Communities <i>Not</i> Development.....	230
<i>THE WAY OUT</i> : Nature and Culture in a Post-Development Climate.....	232
<i>THE WAY IN</i> : Rekindling Notions of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ .....	235
<b>CHAPTER SIX – THE CASE OF THE WHANGANUI RIVER, TONGARIRO</b>	
<b>POWER DEVELOPMENT</b> .....	238
<i>PERSONAL INTRODUCTION</i> : Whanganui, 1990-1991.....	238
MAORI AND WHANGANUI AWA.....	240
THE TREATY OF WAITANGI 1840 .....	245
EUROPEAN ‘DEVELOPMENT’ OF WANGANUI .....	250
DAMMING THE WHANGANUI RIVER.....	257
The Tongariro Power Development Scheme, 1958.....	260
WANGANUI RIVER MINIMUM FLOWS APPEALS, 1989-1990 .....	263
Economic Benefits to the Nation: Electricorp’s Case.....	268
Community, Conservation, Recreation and Tourism Interests .....	272
Protecting ‘Intrinsic Values’: Widening the Circle of Ethical Concern.....	277
Cultural and Spiritual Concerns of Whanganui River Maori.....	281
<i>KAITIAKITANGA</i> VERSUS ‘RESOURCE MANAGEMENT’ .....	286
Resource Management Act 1991.....	290
WAITANGI TRIBUNAL WHANGANUI RIVER REPORT, 1999.....	294
GENESIS RESOURCE CONSENTS HEARING, 2000-2001 .....	301
<i>CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS</i> : Whanganui, 2001.....	309
<b>PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WHANGANUI RIVER</b> .....	311

<b>CHAPTER SEVEN – THE WATER OR THE WAVE? A NONDUAL APPROACH TO THE WHANGANUI RIVER</b> .....	312
ON THE WATER AGAIN: Whanganui River, 2003 .....	312
The Dialectical Framework.....	313
Monism, Dualism and the Reductionist Response.....	317
A Holistic Approach to the Whanganui River.....	321
Nondual Awareness of the <i>Awa</i> .....	324
The Dialogical Opening .....	325
RIDING THE WAVE: Whanganui River, 2003 .....	329
 <b>WHIO PAINTING</b> .....	 331
 <b>GLOSSARY</b> .....	 332
 <b>APPENDIX A: The Treaty of Waitangi</b> .....	 334
<b>APPENDIX B: The Declaration of Independence of New Zealand</b> .....	337
<b>APPENDIX C: Resource Management Act 1991</b> .....	339
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	 340

**TABLES AND FIGURES**

<u>Table 1:</u> Monism, Dualism and Nondualism in Ritual and Game.....	98
<u>Table 2:</u> Contrasting Resource Management and Kaitiakitanga .....	289
<u>Figure 1:</u> Map of New Zealand.....	241
<u>Figure 2:</u> Whanganui River and Major Tributaries .....	256
<u>Figure 3:</u> Tongariro Power Development Scheme.....	258