

# Poipoia te kākano kia puāwai – A reflection of my PhD journey so far

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Tēnā koutou katoa  
 Ko Hikurangi me Te Ahi a te Atua ngā maunga  
 Ko Waiapu me Makatote ngā awa  
 Ko Rāhui me Hiruhārama ngā marae  
 Ko Te Whānau a Hinerupe ki Waiapu me Te Aitanga a Mate ngā hapū  
 Ko Nukutaimemeha me Horouta ngā waka  
 Ko Ngāti Porou te iwi  
 Ko Alana Haenga-O'Brien tōku ingoa  
 Mauri ora ki a tātou!

Kia ora koutou. My name is Alana Haenga-O'Brien (Ngāti Porou) and I am a Doctoral and Clinical Psychology student based at Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington. My Doctoral research focuses on exploring how rangatahi Māori understand, experience, practise, and nurture wairuatanga and hauora using Kaupapa Māori research methodologies. In this piece, I discuss my research and provide brief insights into how rangatahi Māori understand and experience wairuatanga in their everyday lives.

As a young girl growing up, my whānau had told me many 'scary stories' about taniwhā in the Waiapu river, kēhua that roamed around at night, and patupaiarehe that lived in forests which normalised a negative understanding of Te Ao Wairua (the unseen world) for many of my generation living in our papakāenga (hometown). Very rarely had anyone spoken about the healing elements of wairuatanga (Māori spirituality), our ability to tap into our own matekitetanga (sense of heightened intuition: Ngata, 2014), or the important role our tīpuna and kaitiaki have in guiding us ā-wairua (through wairua) to live as authentically and meaningfully as we can before heading back to Hawaiki (spiritual homeland). While some rangatahi were privileged to be brought up by kaumātua and whānau that could guide their understandings of Māoritanga and matekitetanga, many continue to be disconnected from their whānau, whakapapa, and whenua, thereby impacting their ability to consciously engage with wairuatanga.

## Reconnecting with Wairuatanga

Reconnecting with our wairua (spirit/soul), and in essence our Māoritanga, is "about reclaiming the ancient world to come back into our true light" (Māori Movement, 2020). Prior to the introduction of the Tohunga Suppression Act in 1907, Māori healing knowledge systems and institutions were well established (Jones, 2000), with much of the values, practises and beliefs underpinned by knowledge of wairuatanga

(Valentine, 2009). Wairua is understood to be "the source of existent being and life" (Māori Marsden, as cited in Royal, 2003, p.47), yet, as a consequence of colonisation, the cultural transmission of wairua knowledge and practises have largely been disrupted and denigrated over time. Prevalent within society today are negative connotations of wairuatanga as "airy fairy" and "high in the sky", suggesting that wairuatanga is an 'abnormal' way of engaging with the world. In recognition of the importance of wairuatanga to Māori wellbeing, some Tohunga, Matekite, and Māori healers are working towards the conscientisation and normalisation of wairuatanga and rongoā Māori (Māori modalities of healing) as a way of life for the empowerment of our people (See for example: Manawa Ora, 2020; NiaNia et al., 2017; Valentine et al., 2017).

## My Research

In a world dominated by modern medicine, where Tohunga and Māori healers are marginalised and Indigenous knowledge systems of healing are viewed as 'alternative', 'ineffective', or not 'real science', reclaiming our sense of wairuatanga and our interconnection with the universe, our Atua (deities, Goddesses/Gods), tīpuna (ancestors), and kaitiaki (spiritual guardians) is both necessary and challenging. My research is intended to support this current work, by exploring how rangatahi Māori understand wairuatanga and maintain wellbeing. Rangatahi Māori are the future leaders of Māoridom (Walsh-Tapiata, 2002), however, in conjunction with

managing cultural obligations and life challenges, rangatahi are also forced to address the physical and spiritual impacts of historical and intergenerational trauma. Therefore, to support rangatahi in maintaining wellness from a mātauranga Māori perspective, my research explores how rangatahi Māori understand, experience, practise, and nurture wairuatanga and hauora. While the analysis of my interviews with rangatahi is ongoing, the following summarises one of the key areas of my research which was to explore how rangatahi at the beginning of their wairua journey understood and experienced wairuatanga:

- Wairua as energy:
  - ◊ Ngā wai e rua: two constantly flowing rivers, male and female energies, vibe/vibration, spirituality/soul, balance/process of utu
- Wairua as guidance in life:
  - ◊ Tohu: Spiritual/physical signs or sensations within the physical body, wairua, or within a space e.g. ghosts/spirits, dreams, animals/kaitiaki, 'heebee jeebees'
  - ◊ Matekitemanga: Developing a higher sense of intuition to guide one in life and fulfil one's purpose
- Wairua as connection:
  - The divine relationship with Rangī and Papa, our Atuatanga, interconnection of all things, connection with tīpuna, whānau & whenua, and with self
- Wairua as a way of life:
  - ◊ Wairua as healing, identity affirming as Māori, a state of being, living, and doing, wellbeing
  - ◊ Wairua understood as normal: dependent on connection with Te Ao Māori, own/whānau understandings/experiences with wairuatanga, and access to knowledge holders (e.g. Tohunga, Kaumātua, healers)

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Overall, what was clear throughout the interviews with rangatahi was that wairuatanga was fundamental to their health and wellbeing, particularly to their understanding of their identity as Māori. Having an understanding of wairuatanga empowered rangatahi to be Māori, to

know who they descend from and where, and to move forward in life guided by wairua, with the recognition that their tīpuna were with them. Moreover, rangatahi understandings of wairuatanga were dependent on their level of engagement with Te Ao Māori, whether they had access to whānau/friends/role models/healers within their lives who could educate and guide them through their wairuatanga and Māoritanga.

In summary, understanding wairuatanga and rebuilding this knowledge base is paramount to the healing and maintenance of wellness for rangatahi Māori and their whānau. Wairuatanga is fundamental to Māori wellbeing and has the potential to reconnect our people with their past, present, and future. Next steps forward should look to ascertaining how we work with Tohunga, Matekite, and Māori healers to support the eco-system of wairuatanga to thrive within Aotearoa/New Zealand today.

**Aku mihi maioha ki te New Zealand Psychological Society** mō te pūtea tautoko kia whakanui i āku mahi rangahau. Kia ora rawa atu!

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