

The Significance of Te Whatu Kairangi



From a Māori perspective, after the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku the world was originally void of superior forms of knowledge. It instead resided in the realms of the atua who dwelt in the heavens. This knowledge was obtained by the ascension of Tāne (or in some cases Tāwhaki) to the twelfth heaven and brought back to earth to be used by mankind.

From the heavens Tāne retrieved three baskets of knowledge: te kete aronui (knowledge pertaining to good, all things humane and peaceful), te kete tuatea (knowledge pertaining to all evil arts, warfare, and black magic) and te kete tuauri (knowledge of ritual and of all ceremonies designed to remove the restrictions (tapu) that are placed on the relationships that connect all things on earth and in the heavens). This knowledge formed the content of formal study in the whare wānanga (learning institutions of esoteric knowledge).

The curriculum of the whare wānanga was split in two: te kauwae runga (teachings concerning the Supreme Being, cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths, etc) and te kauwae raro (historical traditions, matters of this world). Students went through an intense learning programme, where the information was transmitted orally in a rote learning fashion, and they were then subjected to a series of tests to ensure that they had memorised the content of the whare wānanga to a satisfactory level.

Whatu or stones were used throughout the learning to embed the information within the students. Upon the conclusion of their time as a student of the whare wānanga, students were presented a particular stone called a whatu kairangi to symbolise that they had successfully completed the programme of learning. In essence, they were now tohunga, learned experts. In the Hawke's Bay district, some whare wānanga used small, flat, smooth stones that were red, black and, in some cases, white.

The term Whatu Kairangi is adopted as the name of the teaching awards. The awardees have spent a considerable amount of time becoming notable experts in their field, they have refined their teaching, and been assessed by a panel of experts to have fulfilled the criteria of the awards that leaves no doubt of the impact they have had on their students. The recipients have transitioned from one space to another. In essence, they have been recognised as the learned experts of teaching in their field.

Definitions:

whatu (noun) initiation stone - a small stone swallowed by the student (tauira) during the initiation to become a tohunga. It was said to help in the embedding of the new knowledge within the student. The whatu is a physical symbol that acknowledges the student has reached a certain level in their learning. It is their 'tohu' or their 'award'. Where we might usually expect to see the word "Tohu" in a Māori name for the teaching awards (Ngā Tohu Whatu Kairangi), the use of "Whatu" serves the same purpose.

kairangi (noun) anything held in high esteem, darling, exalted chief, finest variety of greenstone, patron. This word is used in the Māori name for a PhD - He Tohu Kairangi. It also features on the Māori versions of the certificates presented to Kaupapa Māori Award winners. It, therefore, indicates something of the highest level.