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Moana Jackson is Ngati Kahungunu/Ngati Porou. A graduate in law from Victoria University, he completed post graduate study in indigenous legal systems at Arizona State University. In 1988 he co-founded Nga Kaiwhakamarama I Nga Ture, the first Maori Community Law Centre and is currently Director of Te Hau Tikanga, the Maori Law Commission. He works mainly in Treaty and constitutional law issues and the international law rights of Indigenous Peoples. He has recently been appointed a Judge on the International People's Tribunal and has sat on claims by Indigenous Peoples in Hawaii, Canada, and Mexico.

Fires on the Foreshore – The Politics of Knowledge and the Knowledge of Politics

One of the earliest known whare wananga in Ngati Kahungunu was established on Waikawa Island off the east coast of the North Island not far from Wairoa. At the start of each wananga fires were lit along the island foreshore and at the small natural gas vents that are still visible among the rocks inland.

The fires symbolised the transmission of esoteric or mundane knowledge and recognised that any knowledge has a certain power that needs to be respected. There was an ancient realisation that the dissemination and more importantly the control or interpretation of knowledge could be a political act.

As Indigenous Peoples now attempt to reclaim both the methodology and content of indigenous ways of knowing and apply them to contemporary circumstances the need to respect the power in that process is even more acute. At one level there is a well-recognised need to revitalise indigenous knowledge after the centuries in which colonising Western epistemologies have attempted to “de-power” them. At another more important level there is a quest to re-assess what the knowledge was before colonisation and what it might be in the future.

In that latter process there is the thrill of finding a vast world of perception that many thought had been taken away but there is also a danger that it may get lost in a jargonistic and elitist transmission which re-establishes validity while excluding those for whom the knowledge is intended.

There is also a danger that its links to and with power may be diminished in an academic actualisation that separates reclaiming knowledge from reclaiming sovereignty. Rather like the way in which debates about tikanga or “Māori custom” can too easily become a mere discussion of the ritualised theatre of male performance so knowledge in its broadest sense can become a discipline devoid of politics.

This paper attempts to address those issues and considers the power as well as the intellectual dynamics of our knowledge. It seeks again the warmth of its fire.