

A LOOK BACK

THE SOJOURN OF THE FIRST MISSIONARY ON RAPA NUI: EUGÈNE EYRAUD AMONG THE KANACS, 1864

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with Judith Schwartz²*

Brother Eugène Eyraud was the first missionary to work on Rapa Nui. In December 1864 he wrote a letter from Valparaíso to the Very Reverend Father Superior of the Order of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Paris, telling him about his experiences during his first visit to Rapa Nui.³ This letter has been summarized in many publications and, apparently, translated into Spanish. However, we know of no translation available in English and the absence of such a translation has deprived many of those interested in Rapa Nui of a charming and informative account of life on Rapa Nui in the middle of the nineteenth century. In November 2002, while assisting the curators of the museum in Hanga Roa, and as part of our contribution to an expedition organized by Earthwatch under the auspices of Dr. Christopher Stevenson, we came across the correspondence of Brother Eugène and, upon learning that no English translation seemed to exist, we decided to take up the task ourselves. We believe that our efforts will be rewarded by the pleasure that this letter will give to those who are now able to read it.

Using his own funds, Brother Eugène sailed from Tahiti to Rapa Nui, where he arrived on January 2 1864, according to a letter⁴ to the Father Superior in Paris dated December 1864 from Father Olivier, an official of the Order in Valparaíso:

Brother Eugène made appropriate preparations for his voyage. He took several bolts of cloth with which to dress the natives, some carpenter's tools, various pieces of timber and wood with which to build a cabin, a barrel of flour, two or three catechisms and prayer books in Tahitian and, lastly, a bell with which to call the natives to prayer.... He also took five sheep and some cuttings of trees that he hoped would adapt to the climate on Easter Island. During the voyage, he tried to learn a few words of the local dialect from the natives [four men, a woman and a child, who had been rescued after their capture by pirates] whom he was bringing back to the island and he became friendly with one of them, namely, Pana. It was agreed that they should disembark at Anakena, where Pana's family lived, to facilitate Father Eugène's arrival on the island and his acceptance by its inhabitants.

Then Father Olivier adds:

But here we are, on the verge of landing on Easter Island, so let us hear what Brother Eugène has to say:

On the twenty-fourth day of our journey, on January 2

1864, we caught our first glimpse of Easter Island, known as Rapa Nui to the islanders. The captain asked the islanders that we were bringing home with us whether they could see Anakena Bay, where I wished to disembark. After a few moments hesitation, because of the distance, they shouted, "That's Anakena".

The island looked very pleasant, especially after such a long voyage. It must be about 25 kilometers long and 17 wide. In general, the coastline consists of precipitous rocky cliffs and there are few places where one can land easily. The landscape is much smoother than the cliffs, with three large "bosom-shaped" hills. From the top of these hills to the coast, the island is uniformly fertile. The same vegetation grows everywhere, with high grasses everywhere; there are no trees or tall plants; there are deep gullies but no streams. Along the coast, there are three main bays where one can land: Anakena, in the north; Anarova [Hangaroa], in the northwest; and Vahui [Vaihu], in the south. But these bays, if one can call them that, offer no shelter to large vessels.

When we arrived at Anakena, the captain suggested that it might not be a good place to land. In fact, his desire to dock elsewhere was associated with an ulterior motive. However, I was determined to land at Anakena and I insisted to the captain that he let me disembark there. He protested that my baggage would get soaked but I said that would be only a small problem for me and that it was important to let the Kanacs [islanders] disembark immediately so that they could introduce us to their compatriots and so that nobody would mistake us for pirates. The captain appeared to give his consent and ordered that a rowboat be launched from the ship. The Kanacs prepared to get into the boat but, since I had developed a bad headache, I lay down on my bed to rest for a moment. I had hardly fallen asleep when I was awakened by the noise of the Kanacs, who, I had assumed, had already landed. I went up on deck and saw that we were heading for another point on the coast. "Where are you going to let me go ashore?" I asked the captain. "How am I going to be able to transport my belongings from there to Anakena?"

"Don't worry," he answered, "For a gift of four pieces of cloth to the Kanacs, I'll make sure that your things are taken wherever you want."

"That's fine," I replied, "But will you also guarantee that I won't be robbed on the way?"

The captain said nothing, the boat continued on its way and, in the evening, we arrived at Anarova. After testing the depth of



Brother Eugène Eyraud

the water, the captain decided that it would be unwise to dock so we went out into the open sea for the night.

The next day, which was a Sunday, we finally landed. The second in command on the ship was a young Mangarevan called Daniel who spoke some English and French and who seemed to be able to make himself understood by the natives, whose language bore many similarities to that of the Gambier Archipelago.⁵ He was given the job of taking the Kanacs ashore. He came back in a great hurry. Poor Daniel! He was beside himself. Even before coming back on board, he had an animated exchange with the captain, which I could not understand because it was in English. What was wrong?

"I won't go back there for a thousand *piastres*," he told me, "Those are horrible-looking people. They are threatening, armed with spears, and most of them are totally naked. They look even more terrifying because of the feathers that they are wearing as decoration, their tattoos, and their wild cries. And there is smallpox all over the island. Some of the men who came back from Peru brought it and the epidemic has spread everywhere except to Anakena."

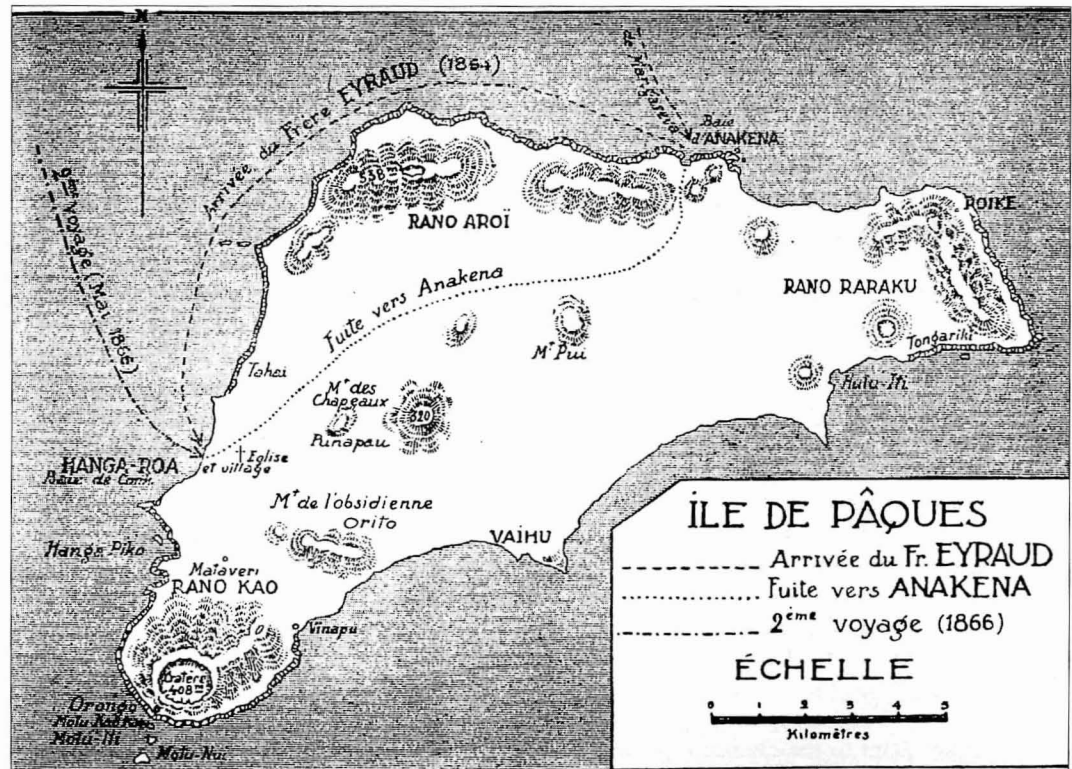
In fact, of one hundred unfortunates who boarded a ship in Peru, only fifteen had escaped death and they had infected their compatriots. The Kanacs who knew of this disease were horribly afraid of it. Daniel had heard them talk about it and, struck by the red complexions of the natives, he thought it was an effect of the scourge, whose effects had, in fact, been exaggerated. Thus, Daniel, afraid of the danger to which he thought he had been exposed, alerted all those on board.

"The captain," he added, "will take you back to Tahiti for free. You shouldn't dream of going ashore – we might lose the rowboat and catch the disease."

"Return to Tahiti!" I replied. "You must be joking.... Do you think I came on board for the pleasure of a sea voyage. The captain and the ship's supplier, when they agreed to bring me here, knew very well that there was smallpox here. In fact, they were the ones who first told me about it".

So it was decided that I should go ashore alone and that I would go by land to Anakena with Pana. The ship would meet me there the following day to unload my baggage. I jumped into the canoe and, while Daniel was rowing, I asked him to take back on board a bit of grass, which I had planned to pick on the shore, for my five sheep that remained on the ship and were dying of hunger. "Ah!" he said. "Who knows if the captain will allow it on board?" "I understand," I replied, "You think that smallpox can be transmitted via grass. Don't worry."

Soon I was on land and pulled up several clumps of grass that I put into the rowboat myself. Daniel's trials were now over and off he went. Mine were just beginning: there I was in the midst of my new hosts. We should certainly excuse Daniel for being afraid. The multitude of men, women and children, perhaps as many as twelve hundred, was hardly reassuring. The men were armed with a type of spear made of a piece of wood to which was attached a sharp stone. These savages are large, strong and handsome, and their faces are much more similar to European faces than those of the inhabitants of other islands in Oceania. The Marquis⁶ islanders are, of all the Kanacs, those who are most similar to Easter Islanders. Their color, even though it is somewhat coppery, is not very different from that of Europeans and quite a large number of them are completely white. But initially, and especially from a distance, one does not know what to think because all of them, men, women and children, have faces and bodies that are painted in a thousand different ways and tattooing adds to the strange impression that they make. They use a kind of earth or



This map is a frontispiece from *L'Île de Pâques, L'Île de Mystère?* R. Père Mouly, des Sacrés-Cœurs (Picpus), Librairie de L'Oeuvre. Brussels, 1935.

the juice of certain plants to decorate themselves in this way – the women only color themselves with red dyes, while the men use all colors indiscriminately.

Daniel had decided that the islanders were hostile because he had been unable to recognize a single woman in the crowd. But he was wrong and it was clear why. At first sight, everyone looked the same because everyone was dressed in the same way. This "uniform" was very simple. The main item was a band of material made of papyrus or some other plant, which they fastened with a cord of hair around their hips. A piece of the same material, but larger, was thrown over their

shoulders and tied around their necks by the two ends to complete their outfits. This was the usual dress of both men and women and explains why, from a distance, one could not tell one from the other. There is, however, some difference. The material with which the women cover themselves is usually made of some kind of straw but men's coverings are made of something else. The men let the ends of their "hip bands" hang down but the women tie them up. Thus, there were both men and women in the crowd on the shore. And it was actually the women that Daniel had noticed predominantly since he had told me that the savages had their hair in spikes that stuck out perpendicularly from their heads. In fact, it is mainly the women who wear their hair in this fashion.

I had time to notice these details but there was something else that struck me forcefully on my arrival on the island. I looked for the Kanacs who had come with me from Tahiti. I found them in the middle of the throng and they looked almost as uncomfortable as I was. The compatriots of Pana and the others hardly seemed to be celebrating their return; they seemed keener in getting their hands on their belongings. I approached them and told them that the captain planned to dock at Anakena in the morning. They paid no attention to what I was saying. I repeated myself several times and Pana finally replied that we would leave for Anakena as soon as we had eaten the potatoes that were in the fire. I was hungry, it's true, but I was even keener to get away from this noisy reunion.

Once we had eaten the potatoes, it was time to set off for Anakena. But each time Pana and I tried to escape, someone would put his hand on my collar. Tired of fighting a futile battle, and without any hope of getting rid of my vigilant guardians, I tried to signal the boat that was in the bay. I wave my hat, my handkerchief; I shout as loudly as I can but it's a wasted effort. We try again to escape, slipping behind a rock, but the group that we found there let Pana through but took me back into the middle of the crowd.

It was getting dark, and I had no idea what was going to happen, when Pana reappeared with some people who were armed with spears. I moved as fast as I could towards them. They placed themselves between my guardians and me, to cover my retreat, and they suggested that I run as fast as I could. I followed their advice. It was 11.00 p.m. when my protectors, who had managed to join me, and I stopped and went into a cave, where women brought us potatoes. We were now able to take a little rest.

At daybreak, we set off again and reached Anakena. The ship was in the bay and came slowly towards us. I tried to signal the captain but he seemed not to understand my signals. He tacked along the shore and so we had to tack along the shore too, with all the natives. We were getting exhausted. Pana wanted to go home and I had a problem preventing his departure, while the ship sailed out of sight. I retraced my steps and, accompanied by several Kanacs, I reached Pana's home before it got dark.

At this point, I felt deeply depressed, seeing myself abandoned on this island, without any resources, and deprived, perhaps for a very long time, of the ability to speak of our Religion to these miserable natives. The ship had left with all my belongings. I could live with that – but what was an irreparable loss for me and the cause of my total loss of confidence was finding

myself deprived of the one thing that could have consoled me for the loss of everything else: my Tahitian catechism, which was essential for teaching the prayers and the main truths of our Religion to the Kanacs. My catechisms and my prayer books were still on the ship; the ship had disappeared and was probably on its way to Tahiti.

I was dwelling on these sad facts when Pana arrived with some of his people. "Your baggage," he told me, "has been unloaded at Anarova and has been taken by people who live over there. The captain wants you to go and talk to him there tomorrow."

"Return to Anarova! That's impossible: my feet have blisters and I have twisted my knee. I can't set off again."

"We'll carry you, if necessary, but you absolutely have to go to Anarova tomorrow. I will come with you, but not all the way because they're furious with me down there."

Then he invited me to eat sweet potatoes and to come into his home for the night. It was the first time that I had been inside a Kanac dwelling. And I want to tell you about it – which won't take long. First of all, the furnishings are very simple: the dishes consist of a calabash for carrying water and a little bag of plaited straw for carrying potatoes.⁷ As for the bed and the furniture, you will understand what they might be when I tell you about the house itself. Think of a mussel that is half open that is resting on its valve and you will have an idea of the shape of the house. A few sticks covered with straw make the framework and the roof. An opening like the opening to an oven allows the family and their visitors to enter – not on their knees but on their stomachs. This entry marks the middle of the building and allows enough light in that one can see oneself after one has been inside for a few moments.

You cannot imagine how many Kanacs find shelter under this thatched roof. It is quite warm inside and one is exposed to the consequences of the poor hygiene of the islanders and the lack of cleanliness of their possessions. One cannot go outside without carrying, in one's clothes (if one has any) a large number of the inhabitants of the hut. But, at night, when one has no other place to shelter, one has to do what everyone else does. So one takes one's place, which is assigned to each one by the very nature of the hut. The door, being in the middle, establishes an axis which divides the hut into two equal parts. People sleep lying head to toe alternately, leaving between them enough space for others to come and go. One stretches out, thus, across the width of the hut, arranging one's limbs as best one can, and one tries to sleep. Even though I was very tired, I had a number of reasons for not shutting an eye. Thus, I was able to listen at leisure to the songs and the weeping that expressed, so I was told, the joy of those present.

At daybreak, the first object that I saw was a little domestic idol, to which people appeared not to pay much attention. Alas! It was not of such gods that I was inclined to think at that time. I started, in front of all those present and with all possible solemnity, to pray in the language of the Kanacs. I needed, more than ever before, to ask God for strength and for patience. My troubles were only just beginning.

I now had to go back to Anarova and deliver myself into the hands of those who had already given me so much trouble. But I had to keep going so I set off again on foot, in spite of the weariness caused by two days of walking along paths that

seemed made to especially to vex European feet. The island's terrain is volcanic, with stones and pointed rocks everywhere. In the midst of these stones and the grass that grows all over the place, there are only the barest outlines of footpaths that are narrower than the sole of a shoe, obliging you to walk with your two feet in a single line, without ever being able to put either foot flat on the ground.

When I arrived in Anarova, I was once again surrounded by a noisy crowd that covered the beach, as on my previous visit. The captain had unloaded my baggage. Several Kanacs, armed with spears, seemed to be guarding my property but they had also taken the trouble to appropriate anything that they could lay their hands on. One of them was proudly wearing my hat, another had managed to put on my coat – everything that had not been under lock and key had disappeared. But I still had several trunks and the sides of a cabin that I had prepared in Tahiti. My most pressing need now was to construct my cabin because the protectors of my property seemed keen on protecting it from its rightful owner also. The four sides of wood attracted the most attention. Some of the people acted as if they were parts of a boat, others tried to figure out what they were for. I told them that if they would leave me alone, I would show everyone what they were. So then they allowed me to approach my things. I took a hammer and some nails and began to set up the wooden walls. But I had to keep stopping to listen to a constant stream of advice, with some in the crowd suggesting that I stop and others that I continue. After proposing many alternatives, the spectators finally understood that the object that had intrigued them to such an extent was a house. I had not, of course, been able to choose the site; I had had to settle for building my house around my trunks. But when the job was complete, I had the satisfaction of seeing my belongings locked up and the hope of being able to sleep in my own home.

It was growing dark and finally I could breathe more easily: I had a shelter, my belongings had not been stolen, and I had a key in my pocket. At that moment, Temanu, one of the Kanacs, came with a gift of three chickens. As a result, I made the acquaintance of a man with whom I was going to become far too involved: my evil genius had appeared in the form of Torometi.... At the sight of the chickens, he came up to me and asked for them, "to take them off my hands and to have them cooked". He did indeed take them off my hands and, during my nine months on Easter Island, the buffoon continued, with unflinching perseverance, to take off my hands everything that I had brought with me but which had by no means been a burden to me.

Torometi is a man of about thirty, tall and strong like the other natives of the island. His untrustworthy and surly manner inspires caution and justifies his bad reputation. I was told that he was not a native of the island – but he was indeed a Kanac, having brothers and a large family. I noticed that he lorded it over his neighbors. It is hard for me to characterize the authority of chiefs on the island. I don't even know the basis for such authority. It seems that authority depended only on the influence that some natives were able to exert over their neighbors and that the people gradually grew accustomed to such displays of superiority. In any case, it was clear that Torometi was a chief: he was my chief and my neighbor. His home was only a few steps from mine but, even so, he did not think that was close

enough because, at nightfall, he told me to open my door, stretched out on my trunks without any ceremony, and invited me to go to sleep. He had just taken over my lodgings.

So now I am definitively established in my new homeland. I am accepted, I am recognized all over the island, or at least I soon will be. My home is going to become the meeting place for all those who are curious about me, that is to say, for all the islanders. I am the *popa*;⁸ the stranger that everyone wants to know, that everyone wants to watch as he works, and, in particular, that everyone will make an effort to exploit. You can already imagine, most Reverend Father, what my life was like on Easter Island. Torometi considered me and my belongings to be his personal property. Bearing this in mind, he gave me daily my ration of cooked sweet potato – he took care to feed me. Thus, I was able to devote my days to teaching the natives. That's what I did from my arrival to my departure. I barely had more than two things to distract me: the work necessary to cultivate a little garden and to sow the vegetable seeds that I had brought with me; and the effort required to protect myself from the constant interference by Torometi. Apart from this, my stay on Easter Island was one long class, a long catechism, interrupted only by brief periods of rest and a few little incidents.

The bell rang three times a day for prayers. We gathered together and I pronounced each word of a prayer and the natives repeated it: we really were praying. Next came classes, when the natives repeated the prayers and the catechism and I tried to teach them to read. In nine months and a few days I did not create any scholars but, in the end, some Kanacs, as many boys as girls, had learned the main prayers pretty well, as well as the principal mysteries of our Religion. Many had started to spell out words and five or six could actually read quite well. These results might not appear too brilliant but you mustn't forget that these poor people hadn't the faintest idea of what I was trying to teach them. Moreover, their language lacked the words with which to describe it. To teach them the prayers, I had to learn their language, which was more difficult than you can imagine. With savages, there is no way that you can ask a question or get some information. They can tell you the name of the object that is in front of them at that moment, but don't go any further – don't ask for the meaning of a word that you don't understand or, in particular, for a definition: that is infinitely beyond anything that they can understand. All that they will do is reply by repeating your question.

To achieve even these minimal results, I had to be, at every moment of the day, at the disposal of these children, both big and little. Ready or not, Professor and Brother Catechist, here come the students. They knock on the door. If I come out immediately, that's fine; we start our class on the grass opposite my cabin. But if I drag my feet or if, believing that I have noticed that my pupils are keener to play than to learn, I try to send them away until later, they don't miss a beat. After having knocked at my door, they knock all around my house, then they sit down a little way away and amuse themselves by throwing stones at the house, first little ones and then bigger ones to keep themselves amused. No matter whether Brother Catechist is in a good mood or not, he had better put in an appearance. So out I come, armed with my catechism and, sitting down on the grass, I say to them, "Come now, gather round, we shall learn some prayers." "No," reply the students, "You come over here!" The

simplest thing is to give in and, with everyone squatting on the grass, we repeat the prayers and the questions and answers of the catechism, with the pupils paying more or less attention. After a little while, some new students arrive. Those who get bored first get up and leave; the last to arrive hasten to follow them. Soon everyone has left and the teacher starts to do something else – but he has to be ready to start again whenever the students decide to begin their studies once more. If it's not today, it's tomorrow – so be ready because here there is little for the people to do and few amusements. They'll be knocking on the door soon, saying, "Teach us to pray."

These good people, in fact, have nothing to do for twelve months of the year. One day's work assures them of an abundant harvest of sweet potatoes that will last an entire year. During the other 364 days, they take walks, they sleep, and they go visiting. They also have big gatherings and party continually. When a party finishes at one end of the island, another begins at the other. The nature of the festivities depends on the season.

In summer, it is the *pa'ina* that attracts the entire population. Everyone brings enough food to last through the whole celebration, especially for the last day, the day of the banquet. All the food, placed in a long line and covered with branches, is the centerpiece. When everyone has run around for several days, when everyone has, according to the rules of etiquette, gone through all the necessary motions, the big day arrives. They gobble down the potatoes or sweet potatoes. Then they gather all the branches that had covered them and make a kind of column or mast, which is called the *pa'ina*.

Autumn and winter are the rainy seasons and the nature of the festivities changes. *Pa'ina* is followed by *areauti*.⁹ There is no more racing around, no more ritual motions or succulent banquets of sweet potatoes. They build large houses at the site of the festivities and, by houses, I mean huts that are higher than usual. Once these are built, the natives gather in groups, form two lines, and sing. What do they sing? Oh! I can assure you that their poetry is very primitive and, more especially, very monotonous. An event that has really sparked their imagination is, in general, the subject of the song. Thus, if a disease has been introduced, smallpox, for example, they sing about smallpox. At one of the parties, they caught my sheep, roasted them and ate them – and then they sang about them, I couldn't tell you how often. Don't imagine that they make up poems on these occasions. They just repeat the thing over and over again – sometimes just a single word – and they sing the same thing from the beginning to the end of the festivities.

Spring brings *mataveri*. They gather on a kind of parade ground. The gathering lasts for two months and again they run and participate in all possible kinds of exercise. *Mataveri* is linked to *pa'ina*, which reappears when summer comes. That's the way our Kanacs do the best they can to keep themselves amused.

Naturally, these festivities are an excuse for displays of extraordinary finery. Everyone appears with his most precious possessions. Thus, some of the outfits are quite eccentric. The Kanacs are no longer satisfied with the simple state of undress of which I spoke above. They put on everything that they can lay their hands on. They paint themselves with greater care than usual – taking advantage of the services of artists skilled in coloration and the tracing of fanciful lines on their faces, which has

a wondrous effect. The women put their pendants in their ears. These are an extremely curious invention in terms of the art of pleasing others. The women begin early in the day to pierce their earlobes with a piece of pointed wood; little by little they push the point in further and further and the hole gets bigger. Then they put in the hole a little role of bark which, acting like a spring, expands and makes the hole even bigger. After a while, the earlobe becomes a slender loop that falls onto the shoulder like a ribbon. On feast days, the women put an enormous role of bark into each loop – it looks quite lovely. Moreover, it is the fashion and here, as elsewhere, fashion has the last word.

On these occasions too, the Kanacs wear an amazing variety of head coverings. It is essential to have a hat of some sort – sometimes it might be a hat decorated with buttons, or even a calabash, half a pumpkin, or a seabird whose carcass has been split open and has been cleaned to a greater or lesser extent. One day, I saw one of these dear Kanacs had had the wit to put one water pail inside another and wore both jauntily on his head. Another, having found a pair of boots left by a Peruvian, had split them open, joined them together and literally shod his head. Long ago I knew a tailor who divided people into two classes: people who clothe themselves and people who dress themselves. It is clear that the Easter Islanders belong to the latter class. They don't care about covering themselves to keep out the heat or the cold; they care about dressing themselves. Thus, on their important feast days, they dress themselves carefully and load themselves up with anything that they can attach to themselves in one way or another. A man who has been able to lay his hands on a dress wears it; if he has two, he wears them both. A woman who has a pair of trousers, a jacket and a coat wears them all in the most elegant manner. And happy is the one who can add to all this luxury something that makes a noise too, such as a piece of metal, etc.! My Torometi, who understood these things, had taken care, early in my stay, to appropriate a little bell that I had brought with me. The bell earned him universal applause and was the subject of much discussion.

So that's how they enjoyed themselves. Not everyone would agree that their activities were so entertaining – myself for one.

My Kanacs were very surprised that I expressed neither admiration nor enthusiasm and they could not understand my lack of interest. On many other points, our lack of accord was, unfortunately, even more apparent. I could never get used to the smell of the juice of a certain plant with which they rubbed themselves and their clothes. And I could never overcome my feelings of repugnance on seeing them catch, with the dexterity and skill of a chicken, and then eat the numerous parasitic insects that made their homes in the small amounts of material with which they covered themselves.

You would probably like to hear some details of the religion of our islanders. As far as I could make out during my nine-month stay, religion seems to occupy a very minor place in their lives. My imperfect knowledge of their language, it's true, prevented me from asking many questions on this subject but, in spite of the fact that I lived with them in close proximity, I never witnessed any act that was really indicative of a religious cult. In each of their homes there were many statuettes, of about thirty centimeters in height, that represented a man, a fish, or a bird, for example. These are, without a doubt, idols, but I never

noticed anyone paying particular attention to them. Sometimes I saw a Kanac take one of these statuettes, raise it into the air, make a few gestures, to the accompaniment of a type of dance and some kind of vague chant. What did these gestures mean to them? I don't even think they knew the answer themselves. They seemed just to be doing what their fathers had done, without giving it any more thought. If you ask them what it means, they answer, as they do about their games, that it is just a custom on the island.

I also never saw any religious rites after someone had died. When an islander is sick, the treatment consists of taking him out of the hut in the daytime and putting him back at night. If the patient dies, they wrap him up in a shroud of straw, a little longer than his body; they tie up the shroud with a piece of *pūrau*,¹⁰ and they put the whole thing opposite the house, on the shore. These bodies, enveloped in their straw shrouds, are placed on a pile of stones or on a type of wooden trestle, with the head pointing towards the sea. Since the people are spread over the entire island, there are dried out bodies all along the coastline, and nobody pays much attention to them.

I don't know what concept these poor savages have about death and the life hereafter. One day, after Torometi had stolen something, I tried to talk to him about the life hereafter and the fact that he would be called to account for his actions. Pana had just died. I reminded him of that and told him that he would do the same. I had no idea of the effect that my words would have. Immediately after I said, "You will die," Torometi looked as if he had been struck by lightning. He started to tremble violently, expressing anger and terror. The bystanders did the same. Everyone was saying, "Our *papa* says: *E pohe o'e!*"¹¹ It was as if I had cast a magic spell. I tried, in vain, to soften the effect of my words, repeating that I did not speak their language well, that I wished them no harm, but it was useless. Everyone was devastated and I was afraid, for a moment, that I might have to pay for my rash statement. This state of affairs lasted for more than two weeks. Everyone knew that I had said, "You will die," and for a long time I was treated as if I had committed a terrible crime. I realized that the words that I had spoken had been taken as a threat or as a prediction of a great disaster. Thus, I advise all those who go to Easter Island to never say, in front of the natives, "*E pohe o'e.*"

This incident made me think, moreover, that superstitions were not unknown on Easter Island and that Torometi had been afraid that I had cast a spell on him. However, nothing happened to support this possibility and I don't think that such ideas are responsible for the things that I am going to report.

In all the homes there were wooden tablets covered with many types of hieroglyphic characters, which are symbols of animals that do not exist on the island and which the natives incise with a sharp stone. Each symbol has a name but the minimal fuss that the natives make of these tablets leads me to believe that these symbols, the remains of a primitive writing system, represent a custom that they continue to practice without trying to recall its meaning.

[The 2nd portion of the letter begins here]

The Kanacs don't know how to read or write but they are very good at counting, having words for all the numbers. They measure time according to a lunar year. But even there they

seem to have forgotten the details and they disagree about the number of lunar cycles. And here's something noteworthy. These savages are very interested in everything related to these issues. When I spoke of months, the sunrise and other such things, everyone would gather round and even the old people would take their places among the school children. There was the same interest whenever I spoke about written correspondence. One day, while I was holding a class, I saw a ship in the distance. Hoping that it might land on the island, I went into my hut to write a few lines. My pupils watched attentively from a distance. They thought that I could talk to people who were very far away and that I was doing so in my hut. They asked my about my conversation with the people on the ship.

Should I speak of the industriousness of these good Kanacs? Their needs are so limited that they have little ambition. It is quite natural for them to be idle and carefree. Nonetheless, they are quite skilled. They braid straw adroitly and work adeptly with thread, with which they make belts, nets, etc. The thread is pulled from the fibrous tissues of the *pūrau*. The bark of the *maute*,¹² beaten and stretched, furnishes the material with which they cover their shoulders. Their tools are just their fingers and any stone that they pick up. They don't know how to use European tools. If they have to trim their beards, they take a sharp stone. They would use a stone to cut thread even if there was a pair of scissors at hand. Above all, they love to sew. One can give them great pleasure by giving them a gift of a few piece of fabric with which to patch their cloaks, which soon begin to look like a harlequin costume.

Agriculture, as I have noted already, requires no great effort. The soil is fertile, if stony, and the regular rains and temperate climate seem to render this little island suitable for all kinds of plant. My attempts were relatively minimal. The few vegetable seeds that I sowed did yield a crop. All the plants that I brought with me seemed to become acclimatized but some of them were stolen by Torometi, who let them dry out before he tried to plant them. The tiny plot that I tried to cultivate disappeared little by little, destroyed by my neighbors and the children. Nonetheless, my efforts did demonstrate that it should be possible to grow all crops found at the middle latitudes. The Kanacs don't need so many things. And agriculture, like everything else, is still at the embryonic stage. When it is time to plant sweet potatoes, they use a pointed stick to make little holes in the ground, they put in the potato eyes, and that's it. If they are planting a vine, they push a little pile of dirt around a seedling and rely for further assistance on Providence. It never occurs to them to till the dirt or to water their plants.

Thus, nature leaves little for these fortunate islanders to do. However, they still have to cook. But here too there is little that is complex. It does not take much to cook the eternal sweet potatoes. That's what they eat every day, the invariable everyday meal of the Kanacs, both young and old. There are indeed a few chickens and, very occasionally, someone catches a fish but these tasty delicacies are shared only by a few privileged people. The wife and children, when the husband has eaten, might perhaps suck on some bones, which have already been sucked free of flesh once and even twice. Apart from these exceptions, there is perfect uniformity: always sweet potatoes, everywhere sweet potatoes, cooked in the Polynesian manner here, as on all the islands, by steaming in a hole in the ground, with heated

stones. However, the Kanacs do this very skillfully and could certainly teach us something.

I have noticed that the Kanacs are very careful not to spill blood. They strangle chickens. One day, I was using my knife to kill a chicken and a woman who saw me almost passed out. To kill dogs and goats, they dig a hole of the desired size and bury the animal's head. When the animal has suffocated, they take out the animal, singe its skin, and then, without further ado, they put the body into the regular oven with the sweet potatoes. I believe that the sight of human blood is similarly repugnant to the Kanacs. Even though they have had knives since the arrival of the Peruvians, they never use them in their feuds. If they want to send someone into the next world, they find it simpler to use stones. Thus, when Torometi was displeased with his meal, he literally stoned his wife so brutally that the poor creature was unable to move the next day.

All that is left to tell you now, Most Reverend Father, is about the purely personal adventures that I had. And I have decided to tell you about them to give you a more exact idea of the morals of the island. These little incidents are not very varied because, at bottom, they all involve my efforts to prevent myself from being robbed of everything or, at least, of everything all at once. Torometi, of course, wanted to steal everything as soon as possible and, while I tried to drag out the entire process, my host took advantage of every occasion to make a renewed assault on my property. Torometi had a very bad reputation, which seemed well justified to me. Nonetheless, I have the impression that, had I fallen into other hands, I would not have been better treated. All the Kanacs accuse each other of theft... and all the accusations are true. If there are some who steal less than others, it's only because they lack the chance or the nerve.

Immediately after I landed, Torometi, who considered himself the owner of everything that I had brought with me, started to appropriate everything that I had not locked away. The next day, I had to open all my trunks in front of him, show him everything that they contained, and explain the purpose of every object. Unfortunately, he was not satisfied with just looking at things. He saw a little axe and immediately took it. That was the subject of our first argument; I resisted as much as I could but I was unable to take it from him. There was only this single axe on the entire island and he was very keen to acquire it. "And anyway," he said, "I'll lend it to you when you need it." So I had to resign myself to the loss of my axe. Torometi was never without this weapon and he used it to induce me to give him everything that he coveted during the course of my stay. During his first inspection of my belongings, another thing that intrigued him was my bell. I had an enormous amount of trouble keeping it and placing it above my cabin. The gifts of nature, with which my guardian absconded, grew up one more time during my stay on the island.

You might find it strange that I was so accommodating. Indeed, I did offer a little resistance but, in the end, I felt that it was prudent not to let things go too far. The natives don't often resort to violence. I have seen them have noisy arguments and burn down each other's huts but without, nevertheless, coming to blows. I am no less convinced that, if Torometi had gotten really irritated, he would have had a way of taking care of me. Moreover, Torometi was not alone – I was dealing with the entire population of the island and, when I was feeling better and I

made a greater effort, I achieved no better results. If I closed my door to this unwelcome scrounger, he would go and sit some fifty paces from my hut, and soon his wife, his neighbors and the anyone in the neighborhood would sit down with him and they would begin to make a terrible row. They would throw stones and make me see quite clearly that it would be better for me to surrender the object that Torometi coveted than to let them demolish my home or to wait until they set it on fire.

Meanwhile, I needed a chapel. I worked on this project during the few free moments that I had when I was not teaching prayers or catechism. There was not much to choose from in terms of construction materials; all I had at my disposal was earth mixed with straw and dried in the sun. It was summertime. I had to be satisfied with seawater for moistening the earth and with dried grass instead of straw. In spite of everything, I would have been able to build something passable had I not been interrupted by the winter rains and if I had had more scrupulous neighbors. In vain, I cut grass and left it to dry: Torometi had discovered that there was nothing better for his kitchen fire and I had to start over every day.

In three months, all that I managed to achieve was the beginnings of a chapel, eight meters long and four meters wide, with walls that were barely 130 centimeters high. The rains prevented me from continuing and Torometi, whom I had asked to help me, told me quite clearly that he did not want a mud house. So I abandoned my work as a mason and concentrated on teaching the catechism exclusively.

Soon I took upon myself the task of visiting the entire island. My intention was to visit the principal sites and to teach the natives at each site in succession. When I told Torometi of my plans, he seemed against them initially but then appeared to approve of my departure. Once I had reached Temana, I started to teach the catechism and to congratulate myself on the good mood of my hosts. But, then, one fine day, I was told that Torometi had taken advantage of my absence to move everything out of my house. I set off again for Anakena, accompanied by a group of Kanacs.

When he saw me, Torometi appeared most surprised. He said that he would have been unable to cause me the slightest harm. According to his account, it was the wind that had blown open my shutters and had caused the disappearance of a large number of items from my hut.

The results of my first excursion made me delay a second one for a while. Moreover, it was wintertime and, even though the winter weather is relatively mild, it is still felt by people who wear as little as our Kanacs. The rain does not last very long but it does rain frequently and sometimes the wind is strong enough to whip up a high sea that prevents anyone from landing on the shore for a week or two at a time. At such a time, my Kanacs had a new idea. They got the idea into their heads that I should build a boat. There was no point my protesting that I knew nothing about such things – my protestations went unheeded. They thought that I knew everything and could do everything, even build a boat without wood and tools. I was in a pretty tricky situation. I have already told you how they carried on when they were determined to get something from me. So they began to make another ruckus. "You want wood," they shouted, "We have lots of wood." And they ran all over the island, gathering all the bits of planks, all the pieces of wood –

straight, bent or rotten – that they could find. This boat was going to be the result of national cooperation. On other occasions, I had noted this custom of making everyone contribute to a project that was considered important. Nobody would think of not participating. There is no need for me to add that I also had to sacrifice some of the wood that I had. Then, with so many fine contributions, it would have been rude of me to refuse, any longer, to get to work as carpenter and boat builder. I ceased to resist and, at the end of two weeks, my impatient Kanacs were able to see something that resembled a boat. Ah! These two weeks had seemed such a long time to them and they had barely allowed me the time to eat.

The assemblage of all these pieces of wood left something to be desired and, in addition, it was also necessary to make the craft watertight. I announced that this final task was their business and, since they indicated that they had a type of clay that would make a good seal, they set to work. I was only afraid of one thing and that was being chosen to take command of this new and dangerous vessel. That same day, and before the seal had time to dry, they wanted to launch it. So I shut myself in my hut.

But they were determined to complete the festivities appropriately. Recalling that the vessels that had sometimes sailed to the island had been manned by sailors in shirts and trousers, they dreamed up the idea of getting all dressed up too. Of course, I had to provide their costumes. One of them, Teoni, had the nerve to go into my hut and steal my trousers. Pushed to the limit, I seized the thief by the arm and threw him out of the door. I had not noticed that he was carrying an axe and I was wounded in the arm. The copious flow of blood horrified the Kanacs, and Teoni gave up his quest for trousers. I went back into my hut and watched the launching of the boat. Dragged brutally across the stones, it reached the water's edge in no time. Now what would happen? Everyone wanted to participate and to contribute to the long-anticipated launching. But, alas, their joy was short-lived. As the boat entered the water, so water entered the boat – and soon it was full. It was impossible to proceed further. Farewell, boat rides and expeditions. Gone were the dreams of our good native islanders. They would have to find other ways to amuse themselves and, indeed, they did not lack for entertainment.

Mataverí was approaching and everyone was a little excited. Torometi's behavior was even more outrageous than before. He asked me for all the rest of my belongings, "to hide them because someone is planning to steal them." Since these fine fellows are so suspicious of one another, and with good reason, they are always on the alert to defend and to hide the little that they have. And hiding places abound. There are deep caves, some natural and some artificial, all over the island, and they have very narrow entrances. Only a few stones are needed to cover and hide each entrance. At any given moment, the entire population of the island could disappear, hiding in these caves. Torometi proposed to put my belongings in one such cave to keep them safe. I refused outright. But Torometi, his brother and his wife, with neighbors as reinforcements, set upon me and I was unable to resist. They took my keys, gathered up all my possessions, leaving me only my mattress and the boxes for my tools. Once the operation was complete, they returned my keys.

Nothing like this had happened to me before. Without a doubt, Torometi had often arranged things so that he could extort some coveted object from me. He had begged me and threatened me but he had never actually resorted to violence. The last barrier had fallen and it seemed that henceforth I would have to fear for my life. The only thing to do was to extract myself from the grip of this tyrant by running away. But, until now, I had never managed to get away without him stopping me or going through my luggage and I had had to beg him repeatedly for permission to go and baptize Pana and three or four others who had begged for this benediction. Thus, I waited for a favorable moment to escape the vigilance of my *Cerberus* – and soon such a moment arrived.

Some Kanacs from Anapika¹³ came to carry my few belongings and I set off with them, in spite of Torometi's arrival just as we were leaving. The people of Anapika were well disposed towards *papa* because, of course, they planned to rob him in their turn. I had hardly had a moment's rest in Anapika when Torometi showed up with some islanders: they had come looking for me. I did not want to go with them and there was another long struggle. In the end, they knocked me down, grabbed me by the arms and legs, and set off again. They had the patience to carry me in this way for about two kilometers but they were not very gentle and I felt almost torn in two. I told them that I wanted to spare them the trouble of carrying me further and they set me on the ground. They returned my shoes and I finished the journey with them on foot.

A surprise awaited me. Torometi had put back into my hut most of the things that he had taken from me a few days earlier.

"You thought that I was a thief but here is what was missing. I simply wanted to put everything in a safe place. The real thieves are the people that you went to see. You will soon understand that because you can give up any hope of seeing what you took with you again: everything is gone. Go back now to those people who don't even have a single sweet potato for you to eat."

I was quite confused, as much by the failure of my scheme as by the mistake that I had made. I understood that Torometi had been right when he told me that I would never again see the things that I had taken with me and that the other Kanacs were not any better than he was. A week later, I went looking for my trunks. Alas, Torometi's words had been true to the letter: I was able to bring back nothing except damaged and empty trunks.

More was about to happen. It was September and *mataverí* brought together a large part of the population about six or eight kilometers from our home territory. Torometi was clearly focused on this reunion and expected that it would bring about the coup that he had been expecting for some time. One of the Kanacs, Tamateka, had, in fact, let me know that Torometi was hated by everyone and that his misdeeds would bring him an exemplary punishment.

One morning, I saw Tamateka arrive, followed by a crowd of people who gathered in front of Torometi's hut. Everyone was talking at once, the discussion became heated and, even though I never understand any of these arguments, it was easy to see that things were going to end badly. I came out of my hut and sat down a little distance away. Torometi, on his side, had come out of his hut but was barely participating in the

discussion. I really wanted to get away from all the fuss but I was keen not to lose sight of my hut and I wanted to keep an eye on the crowd too. Soon things began to get quite threatening. A few brave souls approached Torometi's hut, tore at the straw that covered it, and tried to tip it over. Immediately, it burst into flames. It was windy and the fire was over in several minutes. Torometi had remained impassive, sitting beside the fire. One of his friends had to take him by the hand to pull him away from the fire, which was about to reach him. I was afraid that my hut might suffer the same fate but, I am happy to say, there was no attempt to attack it. In fact, a few Kanacs, armed with spears, set themselves up as guards all around it.

When there was nothing left of Torometi's house, the crowd, seeing the famous boat that I had built tried, in vain, to destroy it too. At that moment, Torometi, surrounded by a few partisans, tried to distance himself from the scene of his misfortunes. Now, instead of being just a spectator, I found myself involved. Torometi wanted me to go with him but his enemies had the opposite idea. However, recalling the futility of my previous attempts to separate myself from Torometi, I decided to follow him.

We set off in the direction of the *mataver* festivities. A dense and excited crowd came with us and the discussions continued. I was in the center of the throng, hemmed in on all sides and deafened by so much noise. My turn had come. Suddenly, I felt my hat being taken and, at the same time, several pairs of hands removed my overcoat, my waistcoat and my shoes, which were soon in tatters. I found myself dressed pretty much like my neighbors. When I was able to glance around, I saw the thieves wearing their spoils: one was wearing my hat, others the remains of my overcoat and those who had taken my catechism and prayer books were looking for ways to include these in their outfits. Our progress was not interrupted by these events; I set off again like the others. We arrived at another hut that was to be set on fire but there was no general agreement and little by little the crowd dispersed. I thought I was at the end of my peregrinations and, in spite of all the emotions that I had experienced, I consoled myself with the thought of spending the night there. But Torometi wanted to return to my hut – he wanted to recover some of the things that had been left there.

So we had to set off again. It was dark and I scratched my feet with every step. It was certainly the worst part of the entire day. When we arrived at my hut, I did not have the key since it had been taken with my clothes. I went in via the roof and passed to Torometi the things that he wanted. For myself, I was happy to put on an old pair of shoes and, draped Roman style in an old coverlet, I set off again with Torometi on the path to Anapika, where his brother lived. We spent the rest of the night there. The next day my companion, who was still worried, thought of moving still further away and led me to Vahui, twelve kilometers further on. Subsequent events proved him right. We learned that his brother's house, where we had stayed in Anapika, had been burned down.

In Vahui, I found sweeter and more docile people, who were keener to learn than those everywhere else. I set to work teaching the catechism with fresh enthusiasm. Barely a week had passed when the children in the class shouted that there was a black dot on the horizon, "A ship!" It really was a ship

and it was aiming for the island. I watched it for a little while but, seeing it head south, I figured that it must be going to do the same as the other four or five ships that I had glimpsed over the past nine months. Night fell and the ship was no longer visible. I went to bed without giving it any further thought.

The next day, at about eight o'clock in the morning, a child came and told me that there was a ship at Anarova and that Torometi was asking for me. I set off without breakfast and met Torometi as he was coming to meet me. The ship was tacking towards the shore. Seeing the French flag, I reassured the Kanacs who were afraid that the ship might be manned by pirates. We followed the ship's movements along the shore and saw a small boat being let down into the water. Torometi, without waiting any longer, took me on his shoulders and carried me to the boat, where I fell into the arms of Father Barnabé. A moment later, we were aboard the *Térèse Ramos*.

Father Barnabé will tell you the details of his voyage to Easter Island. As for me, when the decision is made definitively to establish a mission on the island, I might be able to give some useful advice to those to whom this task is assigned.

In the meantime, please be assured, Very Reverend Father, of my deepest respect and my total devotion to the Order of the Sacred Hearts.

– Brother Eugène Eyraud

FOOTNOTES

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³ Brother Eugène's letter was originally published in *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* (Annals of the Propagation of the Faith), 38:52–71, 124–138, 1866.

⁴ Father Olivier's letter was published in the same volume, 38:45–52.

⁵ An archipelago 1,600 km southeast of Tahiti, the largest island of which is Mangareva.

⁶ Marquesas Islanders.

⁷ The reference is to sweet potatoes.

⁸ *Popa'a* is Tahitian for a stranger of a white race. There is some question whether Eyraud wrote "papa" or "popa". Apparently it could be either way, depending upon an interpretation of his handwriting. While "papa" might be used to describe the father of his flock, "popa" would make sense in the context of being a white stranger.

⁹ According to Steven Roger Fischer (personal communication 2003), the word "*areauti*" was mentioned also by the other missionaries, and has puzzled scholars ever since. It appears to relate to a pre-contact feast, and was renamed once either Eyraud or the other missionaries, lay brother and catechists arrived, to "*areauti*". This appears to be an incorrect transcription (because of French phonology) of what was originally "*hare ha'uti*" or "play/lovmaking house", which doubtless refers to the activities which took place in the building. While "*hare*" is Rapanui for "house", the "*ha'uti*" is Tahitian, for "play/lovmaking", and would have been a borrowing of the 1860s, one of the first recorded borrowings in the Rapanui language. What the original name of the feast was is still unknown.

¹⁰ Rope made from the bark of *Hibiscus tiliaceus*; *Pūrau* is the Tahitian term for Hibiscus, used here by Eyraud. The Rapanui word is *hauhau*.

¹¹ *E pohe o'e* is Tahitian for "dying of hunger". Again, the "papa" in this sentence might be "popa".

¹² *Mahute* or barkcloth.

¹³ This probably is Hanga Piko.