

approach and should be consulted; second, because not all islanders, nor first-hand accounts, are necessarily accurate or without bias. During a visit to Ahu Akivi I personally overheard a guide explaining to the group of tourists in his charge that there was no such thing as a female *moai* and that the very concept had been introduced by missionaries to shame the islanders who, he asserted, would never, ever construct a *moai* with female features because it would be embarrassing and drain *mana* from the people. And need I mention the NPR broadcast in November of 2004 when producer Jack Chance related a story he'd been told by an islander about "white folks" who came to Easter Island to "baptize nonbelievers with hydrochloric acid"? As Routledge said, "It was even more difficult to collect facts from brains than out of stones ... it is particularly difficult to arrive at the truth from the untutored mind ... when memory was vague, there was a constant tendency to glide from what was remembered to what was imagined.... The information given in reply to questions is generally wildly mythical". I do not say this to question the veracity or legitimacy of Easter Islanders *per se* but to advocate the virtues of objective inquiry and evaluation before drawing any conclusions. And certainly before committing anything to paper.

Had Barbour tried to find an agent or established publisher (and he may well have), he should have discovered that either *Blue Planet & Beyond* contributes nothing new or that he would have been encouraged to do some thorough research so that his book was not only accurate but constituted a useful addition to the literature on the subject even if it covered similar territory as previous works. With a subject like Easter Island, where there's no shortage of nonsense still being written, it's disheartening to find another poorly written and sloppily researched book that lends nothing to the discussion about the island (or any microcosmic relationships to our planet) and, worse, needs much correction. I've never been one to put too much stock in reputation or credentials because these alone won't support a weak premise – but, in the absence of these, and especially with no consistent references to source material throughout most of the book, it comes down to being one very long opinion formed from sometimes disparate strands of fact, legend, myth, conjecture, and outright error.

The good news is *Blue Planet & Beyond* is available only through POD systems, which means it probably isn't likely to show up in bookstores or to garner a lot of attention. The Golden Phoenix Publishing press release about *Blue Planet & Beyond* says Barbour's next book, due this summer, is supposed to lead the reader "into unsuspected realms of esoteric thought and metaphysical adventure". Seems to me Barbour has already done this with his first book and, sadly, none of us – least of all Easter Island – is better for it.

The Sweet Potato in Oceania: A Reappraisal

Edited by Chris Ballard, Paula Brown, R. Michael Bourke
and Tracy Harwood, 2005

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Review by Scott Nicolay

I hope that the readers of this journal will not pass this volume over in the mistaken impression that its topic is an esoteric one, of interest only to ethnobotanists. The truth is that the study of the sweet potato cuts straight to the heart of some of the most important issues in Polynesian prehistory, especially for Rapa Nui. From which direction was Rapa Nui settled? What caused the unprecedented rise of the statue cult? Was there prehistoric contact between Polynesia and South America? All these questions lead back to the sweet potato, or kumara as it is known in Rapa Nui. The tuber that remains a novelty on the North American dining table has literally been at the center of life on Rapa Nui since time immemorial. The Rapanui people have a saying: "Here we begin at birth by eating sweet potatoes, then we go on eating sweet potatoes, and finally we die." (Metraux 1971:153). Though the world sees the *moai* as the symbol of Rapa Nui, the sweet potato has been of far more importance in their daily lives. Therefore, I believe that our readers will find much of interest in *The Sweet Potato in Oceania: A Reappraisal*, a volume that presents cutting edge research on the history and mystery of the kumara in the Pacific and with emphasis on Rapa Nui.

The original masterwork on this topic is Douglas Yen's: *The Sweet Potato and Oceania*, published by the Bishop Museum Press in 1974. Yen argued convincingly that the sweet potato could only have entered the Pacific via human agency. However, he identified three separate routes of transfer: one prehistoric (the Kumara line) and two historic (the Kamote and Batatas lines). Yen's monograph provided a foundation for all future study of the sweet potato in the Pacific, but it was not the final word on the topic. One of the most important questions that remained for future researchers to resolve was that of the human agents of sweet potato transfer: did they originate in Polynesia or South America? Another was the question of the sweet potato's arrival in Papua New Guinea, as all three lines of transfer converged there. Many other details of the process remained to be worked out as well. As Yen himself writes in the final chapter of the current volume, his original hypothesis is "more questioned than resolved." Now, more than 30 years later, a new generation of researchers has tackled these questions, building on Yen's foundation to address some of the most important questions in Pacific research, and to address the unique history of Rapa Nui itself. Like Yen's original monograph, the papers in the

current volume draw on a wide range of disciplines, combining archaeology, ethnobotany, linguistics, and palynology to attack the research questions from all possible angles. What emerges is not an addendum to Yen's classic study but a genuine companion to it.

Most of this review will focus on the first half of the current volume, which will be of greatest interest to the majority of *RNJ* readers. The papers in the latter half relate to the role of the sweet potato in Papua New Guinea, and although that land is still within the scope of this journal's editorial mission, it is through the papers that apply to Polynesia and to Rapa Nui specifically that our readers will connect to the topic at hand.

Chris Ballard's paper provides a dynamic introduction to the book, outlining the issues and inviting the reader to consider whether the sweet potato is still "good to think with." By the end of his chapter, the reader will have little doubt that it is. The first actual paper, "Sweet potato in Papua New Guinea", by R. Michael Bourke, is of course, about PNG, but it provides an excellent understanding of the unique features of the sweet potato that have made it such an important crop throughout much of the Pacific. The sweet potato revolution that must have taken place on Rapa Nui centuries before the arrival of Roggeveen is still underway in PNG.

The next chapter, "Needles in a haystack: searching for sweet potato in the fossil pollen record" by Simon G. Haberle and Gill Atkin, asks a question that has probably occurred to anyone who is familiar with John Flenley's classic studies of pollen on Rapa Nui. The answer may surprise and even disappoint some readers, but the paper itself is fascinating, and an excellent lesson in the limitations of science.

With the next paper, "Kumara in the Ecuadorian gulf of Guayaquil?" by Richard Scaglione, things will really start to get exciting for the *RNJ* reader. Many readers will be familiar with the presence of terms similar to the Rapanui *kumara* in South American languages. However, D. R. Brand claimed in 1971 that no such term appeared in any coastal language in the New World. Now Scaglione provides conclusive ethnographic and historical evidence for precisely such a term amongst a major sweet-potato growing people of coastal Ecuador, and thereby very likely identifies the actual location of an original Polynesian landfall on the South American coast.

Chapter 5, "Sweet potato transfers in Polynesian prehistory", is by Roger Green of the University of Auckland, one of the foremost figures in the archaeology of island Oceania. Green's paper is the longest in the volume, and is one of two or three that will be of greatest interest to our readers. It is also probably the most comprehensive, marshalling an enormous body of evidence from a range of sources and disciplines to track the appearance of the sweet potato in Polynesia virtually island by island. Among the more exciting conclusions that Green draws from his research is that there may have been more than one voyage from Polynesia to South America, as well as between Rapa Nui and the rest of Polynesia. Given our vastly better understanding of Polynesian navigation in the post-Höküle'a era, this seems more than plausible now. Most intriguingly, Green argues that although the first Polynesian voyage to South America very likely did take

off from Rapa Nui, it probably did not return there, at least not directly. He also presents evidence that the cultural exchange was a two-way one, with the ancient Ecuadorians acquiring the coconut and the sailing raft. The latter offers an exciting parallel to the possibility that the prehistoric presence of sewn-plank canoe technology among the Chumash of southern California may be another evidence of Polynesian voyaging to the New World. Thanks to the pioneering work of Terry Jones and Kathryn Klar, this has become a hot topic in American archaeology over the last few years (cf. *Rapa Nui Journal* 19:2, pp.141-142, 2005).

In Chapter 6, Helen Leach addresses the issue of why the Polynesians would have adopted the sweet potato rather than maize. Considering the prehistoric importance in the Pacific of other root crops in the Pacific, such as taro, and especially yam, her argument seems almost beyond question.

Chapter 7 discusses the transformation of Kahikinui, Maui, one of the driest areas in the Hawaiian archipelago, into a region of considerable population density, and in Chapter 8, Paul Wallin, Chris Stevenson, and Thegn Ladefoged – all names that should be highly familiar to *RNJ* readers – present evidence that the sweet potato was not among the crops brought to the island by its original settlers. Instead, they argue, it came later, and the adoption of this highly productive and highly nutritious foodstuff transformed the island's agriculture and created the surpluses that led to the unprecedented explosion of monumental architecture, i.e. *ahu* and *moai*, on the island. This is a paper that addresses the very nature of the world's ongoing fascination with this tiny island: Where did the statues come from. Perhaps they came from the sweet potato.

Chapter 9, "Of kumara and canoes: Maori and Hawaiian mythologies and American contacts" by Serge Dunis, was for me the least convincing and most convoluted paper in the book. Nonetheless, it is a exploration of Polynesian mythology. However, considering the extreme polyvalence and levels of esotericism in these traditions, I do not think it is possible to draw the kinds of conclusions from them that Dunis does.

The next eight chapters focus on PNG, and give a robust picture of the role of the sweet potato in that nation's past, present and future. The agricultural revolution that may have transformed Rapa Nui as early as the thirteenth century is still underway in the opposite end of the Pacific. Although these papers will likely be of less interest to our readers, that parallel should not be overlooked.

Appropriately, the book's final chapter is by Douglas Yen, who describes the genesis of his original monograph (one of the classics of Pacific studies) in his own transformation from plant-breeder to ethnobotanist. His discussion of the last 30 years of research on the topic is marked by humility and a delightful dry humor, which he himself attributes to cutting loose a bit in his old age.

Altogether, 27 authors contributed to this volume. Although they come from a variety of disciplines, one does not need to be a specialist in any one area to appreciate their work. The papers are clear and free of excess jargon. Though *The Sweet Potato in Oceania: a Reappraisal* may not be the

easiest book to find, it presents important ideas and provides a welcome alternative to the current crop of popular pseudo-scientific writers who fantasize lost maritime races bringing high culture to the world, and accuse scientists, especially archaeologists, of ignoring diffusionist arguments. Sadly, sweet potatoes don't earn shelf space at the local Barnes & Noble, which is why commercial writers ignore the true smoking gun for prehistoric trans-Pacific contact. The ancient Polynesians, as skilled in agriculture as in navigation, found their gold not in Inca treasuries but in the farms and gardens of Ecuador. They returned with a crop that revolutionized the social structure on many islands and may have lead directly to the great era of *moai* construction on Rapa Nui. The research in this excellent volume proves that though sweet potatoes may not be as romantic and fashionable as imaginary sea kings, they are better "to think with."

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MOAI SIGHTINGS

THE MOST ASTONISHING *moai* sighting in years comes from the Outdoor Education Garden, a new feature at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens in Romsey, England. The twenty-foot *moai* – constructed of woven hazel branches – stands at the top of the outdoor garden (see below). While a tad out of proportion, there is no mistaking it's inspiration. The wicker *moai* has inlaid eyes of woven willow hazel with silver birch bark for the whites, providing a somewhat sinister effect. Along with the story of Easter Island, students learn about the importance of respecting the environment. Our thanks to David Maddock for providing news of this apparition, illustrated in *Hampshire Now*, #19, 2006.



Another *moai* sighting comes from Mesa, Arizona, (below) where Shawn McLaughlin spotted a handsome fella, over-looking a swimming pool.

