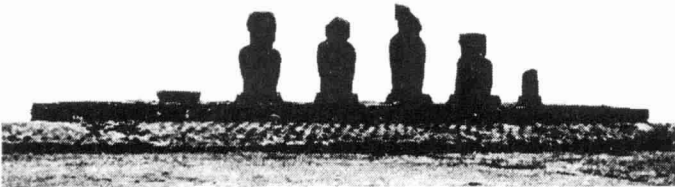


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The entire population of Easter Island (approximately 2500 people) lives today in Hanga Roa, the capital and only city. Two-thirds of the inhabitants are from autochthonous lineage; the remaining residents and visitors are considered to be *estrangeros* (foreigners) and come mostly from the *Conti* (an abbreviation of *continente*) that is, Chile, which has become a metonymy of the outside world in the natives' mind. In February 1995 I was one of those foreigners. My goal here is to recall basic geographic and historic information about the island and to comment upon my stay among the friendly people I met there.

Faithful to its etymology, Easter Island is located almost 2000 km away from the nearest inhabited place (i.e., Pitcairn Island), becoming the most isolated human haven in the world. Indeed the Latin word *insula* (etymological root for island in English, *isla* in Spanish, *île* in French, etc.) refers precisely to the portions of land that are isolated in relation to continents. Geographically speaking, Easter belongs to the archipelago of Polynesia; however since 1888 it has been integrated into the political map of the Republic of Chile. Astonishing megalithic constructions—the famous *moai* and *ahu*—along with their hieroglyphic writing make this beautiful island one of the most important archaeological sites of South America.



Despite the destruction, the idols of stone are still important.

According to oral tradition, Easter Island's history starts in the fifth century AD. Departing 3200 km northwest, from the archipelago of the Marquesas, the maori king Hotu Matu'a and his followers founded the first human settlement. Natural isolation led the following generations to believe there were no others on the surface of the earth. Hence the origin of the two primitive names of the place: Te Pito o te Henua (navel of the world) and Rapa Nui (Great Island).

Rivalry between groups known as the Long Ears and Short Ears and the following tribal wars were probably due to land dispute resulting from the critical relationship between man and space. With many of its monuments damaged or even destroyed during warfare, Rapa Nui's society was in decline when the island first entered Occidental history and geography: on April 5, 1722, Easter Day, Dutch Admiral Jacob Roggeveen and his crew, who left the Dutch island of Texel toward the *Terra Australis*, were the first Western people to set foot on Te Pito o te Henua—which was to be known thereafter as Easter Island.

In 1770, Rapa Nui was claimed by the Spanish Crown—pioneer in exploring the world's great ocean by sailing through Tierra del Fuego—and named San Carlos. Spain did not pursue interest in the island; she was too occupied with revolts and wars. In the following decades, Rapa Nui's history is characterized by the visits of ships from different countries such as Great Britain, France, Russia and the United States.

As it happened with other Pacific islands, the arrival of the West had disastrous consequences: progressive devastation of fauna and flora, and enslavement of the indigenous. The Peruvian slave raid of 1862 alone led to a nearly complete annihilation of the Rapanui people.



Are the statues emerging from the earth or is the earth swallowing the statues?

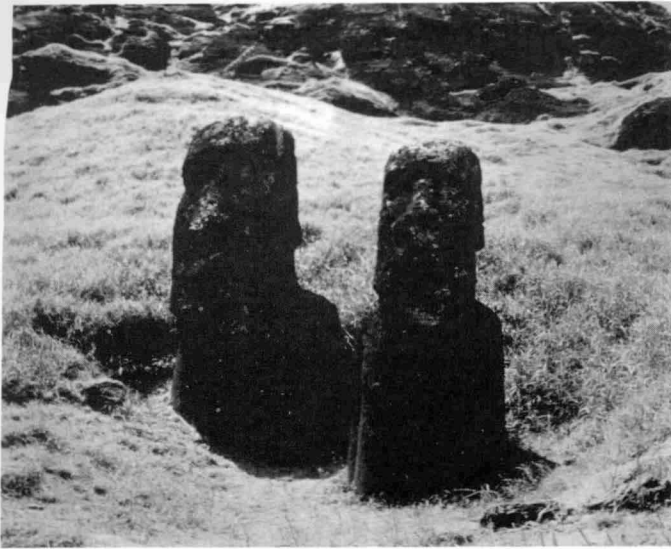
Summoned by the French priests in Valparaiso with the mission of preaching the Gospel to the natives, Brother Eugène Eyraud (now in the process of beatification) landed in January 1864. He described the Rapanui:

"These people are tall, strong and well built. Their features resemble far more the European type than those of the other islands of Oceania. Among all the Polynesians, they resemble the Marquesans the most. Their complexion, although a little copper-colored, does not differ much from the hue of the European, and a great number are even completely white."

The courageous missionary encountered intense difficulties, arising from the fact that the population seemed to develop no religious rituals. Communication was a challenge, since he was not proficient in the autochthonous idiom thus could not reach the level of abstraction required for transmitting concepts of theological character. On the other hand, the islanders were well acquainted with the idea of soul immortality and that of a creator god (Makemake) and this favored the acceptance of the Christian doctrine. By Eyraud's death in 1868, all the natives had been baptized.

Today, Catholic religion is syncretic in Easter Island. Liturgical hymns are based upon Rapanui oral traditions and the church images evoke facial features of their ancestors. José Miguel Ramírez Aliaga, the archaeologist responsible for the Rapa Nui National Park, told me this reflects the ancient social system of clan divisions: even today each native knows

the portion of the land that once belonged to his original clan. Rivalries from the past are strong on the island. Penetrating into a territory formerly belonging to enemies requires permission from the spirits that dominate it. If it is denied, the islander should withdraw for trespassing is *tapu*, upsetting the spirits can cause serious retaliations, such as accident, illness or even death. *Los espíritos molestan*, people still say.



Moai, where are you looking at?

Victorious in the War of the Pacific (1879-1884) against Peru and Bolivia, Chile annexed Rapa Nui with the aim of expanding its frontiers and withholding a naval station on the trade route between South America and East Asia. Chilean efforts toward colonization were fruitless, thus lands were partly sold or leased to a wool company run by a Valparaíso businessman, Enrique Merlet. These holdings were acquired in the 20th century by the Chilean branch of the Scottish S. Williamson & Company (CEPID) which controlled the island until 1953 when the Chilean Navy took over.

In the 1960s, the Chilean government provided important improvements for the quality of life such as medical care, basic schooling, potable water, and electricity. Connected by air with Santiago and Tahiti since 1967, Rapa Nui has proved to be a profitable tourist attraction. In fact, from that time on, tourism has become the main economic activity for the people

Following in the steps of Brother Eyraud, Don Ramiro Estevez, the late vicar, wanted to establish a Pastoral Plan in Easter Island. He believed tourism has a negative effect on Rapa Nui society: consumerism, promiscuity, alcoholism, and the use of drugs are some of the results of contact between islanders and tourists in the last decades. Don Ramiro believed these problems were aggravated during and after the filming of Warner Brothers'

Rapa Nui. Although its proposal of an archaeological approach is explicit, the reality portrayed—based upon Hollywood clichés—presents a distorted idea of both the culture and the history of the island (for more details about the film, see the article by James Hynes, *RNJ*8(4) 1994: 111-115).

Intermarriage with foreigners, especially British, Chilean, French, German, Italian, North American, Tahitian and Tuamotuan, created ethnic transformations in the native population. It is thus controversial to speak nowadays of “authentic islanders” in Rapa Nui. As Sr Ramírez points out, the term *indígena rapa nui* is not clearly defined in Chilean legislation. This jeopardizes the cultural identity of a society as well as that of all other pre-Columbian people who still live within Chilean borders, the ethnic groups Mapuche and Aymara and the communities Kawashkar, Yamana, Atacameña, Colla and Quechua. The crucial point is expressed in the second article of the *Ley Indígena*, edited in 1993 by the Special Commission for Indigenous Peoples, where there is too large a range for interpreting the kinship level necessary to be considered *indígena*. As Ramírez states, this law may have serious consequences, such as the attempt to forge ethnic identity in order to obtain the benefits granted by the Chilean government, such as financial facilities and land donation.

Dedicated to the preservation of the culture of her people, the islander teacher Viki Haoa Cardinali teaches Rapanui language and literature at the Liceo Lorenzo Baeza Vega. One of the results of her beautiful work is the book *He Pata 'u-Ta' u o Te Ga Poki* (Poems of the Children) which contains poetry by Rapa Nui's boys and girls and which was composed for an annual literary competition. The poem *He Moai* (The Statue) by David Menezes Salvo, was awarded the second prize in 1991. Three of its verses struck me in their eloquence:

Te Moai, a he koe ka ki mai i te parauti'a?! E hia 'a'amu e ai ro 'a i a koe, mo 'a'amu mai ki a matou?! E te Moai, ki he koe e u'i'ena? [Moai, when will you tell me the truth?! How many stories do you have to tell us?! Moai, where are you looking at?]



Disco Toroko: a hybrid feature of Rapa Nui culture today