

Some Words About Voldemars Matvejs [Vladimir Markov] and His Book *The Art of Easter Island*

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FOR MOST OF THE WORLD the knowledge of Easter Island is still associated with the famous Norwegian traveler Thor Heyerdahl, whose expeditions and books aroused much interest in the Island in the second part of the 20th century. However, in the very same year as Heyerdahl's birth, 1914, a small book, *The Art of Easter Island*, was printed in St. Petersburg, Russia. This book was undoubtedly the first on the subject, with the author's scientific interests closely linked to the particular qualities of Easter Island art, and seen through the eyes of the new art of the time. Whereas Carl Einstein, author of the first book related to African art (published in 1915), is well-known to a wider audience, the name of Voldemars Matvejs [Vladimir Markov], author of the first book about the art of Easter Island, means something only to a very small circle of specialists, mainly of the Russian avant-garde. This is not surprising. Until now, Matvejs' book has existed in a single edition, published shortly before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, by the Petersburg avant-garde artists' society, "Soyuz Molodezhi" (The Union of Youth), in an edition of just 500 copies! The main purpose of this article is to shed light on an almost completely unknown page of history in the early studies of Easter Island art.

There have to be strong reasons why this book was so completely forgotten. One, perhaps, is that there has been too rigid a classification of disciplines and fields of study, and they have tended to be too compartmentalized. This state of affairs still exists, with tribal art objects largely the preserve, at least in scholarly and museological terms, of ethnologists. Most specialists in this field still know very little of 'primitive'¹ cultures' relationship with Modernism and other movements in 20th century art. Similarly, scholars of the Russian avant-garde or early Modernism know little of ethnology. In many cases they are not familiar even with the main ethnographic art collections. Now, however, the situation is beginning to change. A new century has started, and already 20th century 'global' art history is being revised, enlarged and reevaluated. Substantive changes may be seen not only in the ethnographic art museums, but elsewhere also.

Let me give just a few examples. The Musée de Louvre

has started a major project: the preparation of the new Museum of Arts premiers² at Guai Branly, which will open in 2004. This project was accompanied by the opening of the Museum's new wing, the Pavillon des Sessions, at Guai Louvre. Since April 2000 an excellent selection of nearly 120 masterpieces from the earliest civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas has been on display. These works of art were selected by Jacques Kerchache, scientific adviser at the Musée du Quai-Branly and come from different public collections in France. This show may rightly be considered as a starting point for the new vision of whole-world art history. Today, tribal art represents a major aspect in world art and reflects the develop-

ing interests of society. But there is more! The art of archaic cultures from Africa and Oceania has been recognized not only as of national or regional importance, but also as a part of world heritage. The Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou opened its updated permanent collections in January 2000. African sculptures stand alongside of works by Braque, Picasso, Matisse, Ernst, Miró, etc.

The same changes in display can be found also at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. It is well-known that Russian collector Sergei Shchukin was a true art lover and supporter of French modernists. An important part of his collection is now located in this museum. He bought canvases by Picasso and examples of African sculptures at the same time and displayed them alongside each other in his mansion. An article by Jakov Tugendhold concerning the French collection of Sergei Shchukin, published in the Russian art magazine *Apollon* in early 1914, contains information about the display, and the author also comments that there were some marvelous wooden sculp-

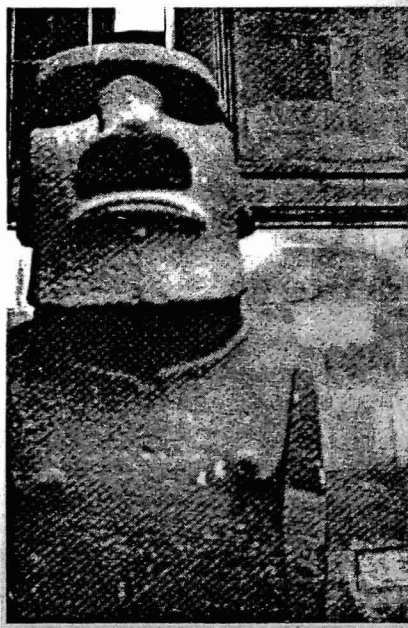
tures from Madagascar and the Congo³ In this way, the historical object-to-object relationship was reconstructed in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. We know that Sergei Shchukin had at least seven objects of African art. He had purchased them in Paris, probably between 1908 and 1912, and an important number most likely came from the Hungarian dealer in tribal arts, Joseph Brummer. Four of them were later illustrated in Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* in 1915. From another side, one



Voldemars Matvejs, 1912 (Photograph by Varvara Bubnova, courtesy of the Information Center of the Latvian Art Academy)

African sculpture from the Brummers' collection was reproduced in Matvejs' book *The Negro Art*⁴ in 1919, and, as we will see later from quotations from Matvejs' letters, Matvejs and Shchukin probably visited some tribal art shops together.

Let me briefly give some biographical facts about Volde-mars Matvejs. He was born on October 13, 1877 in Riga, Latvia, which at that time was part of the Russian Empire. His parents ran a buffet at one of the Riga railway stations. His father died while he was still very young, and he was brought up by his mother and his stepfather. After leaving school in 1895, he studied at the art school of Benjamin Blum in Riga, graduating in 1902. Matvejs, following the path of many other young, promising talents, went to the Russian imperial capital, St. Petersburg, for his initial training. In 1906-07 he attended the private painting studio of the Polish artist Yan TSIONLINSKY. Entering the Academy of Arts in 1906, he became a student of landscape painting and studied under professors Kiselev and Dubovskoi. He was due to graduate in the autumn of 1914 but on 16 May of that year he died suddenly of peritonitis.



Moai at the British Museum, 1913, from Matvejs' book, *The Art of Easter Island*, courtesy of the Latvian National Library. When this photograph was taken, the statue was standing on the porch of the museum.

Stated thus, there is little that is exceptional. But it is clear that Matvejs' main interests and activities lay outside his academic studies. In 1906-07 he edited *Vystavochnyj Vestnik* [Exhibition Messenger] in St. Petersburg. Matvejs was one of the initiators and active members of the Russian avant-garde artists' group, The Union of Youth, which existed from 1909 to 1917. During the summer of 1910 he organized an exhibition by that group in Riga. Alongside the exhibition he came up with a bold and instructive manifesto *The Russian Secession*,⁵ published in

Latvian, Russian and German newspapers in Riga. Ideas on the same subject were developed in a series of articles "The Principles of the New Art"⁶, published in 1912 in the magazine *The Union of Youth*, 1st and 2nd issues. He had a considerable impact on the development of the Union, publishing a number of important theoretical works under the pseudonym Vladimir Markov. There is no doubt that nowadays he is remembered more because of his writings than his paintings.

Matvejs spent every summer from 1910 to 1913 in Europe, collecting material for his creative and theoretical work. In 1909 he visited the Swedish island of Gotland and was

fascinated by the beauty of the medieval city of Visby and the brilliant Early Gothic sculptures there. In 1910 he traveled throughout Italy. In 1912 he was in Paris, Berlin and Cologne. The Union of Youth group partly subsidized Matvejs' journeys in Europe in the summers of 1912 and 1913. The latter journey was especially important for the development of his theoretical essays. Together with his close friend Varvara Bubnova he visited different collections of the ethnographic museums in "... Stockholm, Oslo, Leiden, Amsterdam, Brussels, Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg, Paris and London," — as Bubnova later recalled in her memoirs.⁷ Being an enthusiastic student of medieval art, primitive and folk art, Negro sculpture, Byzantine and oriental art, etc., areas that were little understood or appreciated in those days, he paid great attention to the reserves of ethnographic museums and, along with Bubnova, made notes and sketches and took photographs.

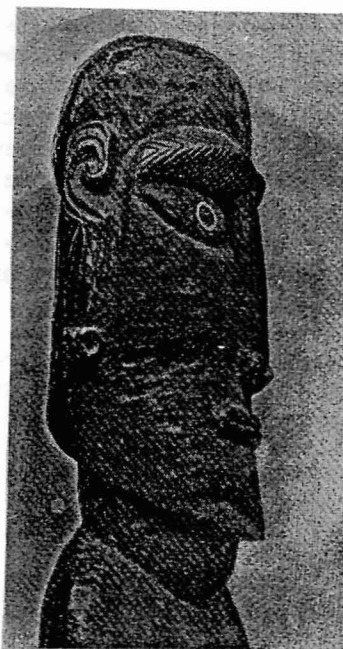
After this journey through Europe Matvejs was able to finish several books. *The Creative Principles of the Plastic Arts: Faktura* was published by the Union of Youth in December 1913. It was followed shortly afterwards by *The Art of Easter Island* in January 1914 and *The Chinese Flute* in March 1914. After his death Varvara Bubnova prepared *The Negro Art*, for publication and, thanks to the intercession of poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, it was published in 1919 in Petersburg by Narkompros. This book is undoubtedly Matvejs' most popular book. Printed in an edition of 2000 copies, it has survived more widely than his earlier works. It contains 117 original images relating to 72 sculptures. Unfortunately, the announced edition of "The Art of Northern Asia" was not realized because of war, revolution and other unforeseen circumstances. Many of Matvejs' notes, writings and paintings have been lost, probably forever. The best part of Matvejs' surviving paintings is the property of the State Museum of Art, while a small collection of his canvases belongs to the Tukums Art Museum.

What was the purpose of ethnographic studies for artists at the turn of the 20th century? The answer may be found in the words of the artists themselves. For example, Matvejs wrote in "The Principles of New Art", published in the 1st edition of the magazine, *The Union of Youth*:

Means of communication, the press, excavations — all provide us with the opportunity of collecting together all man's achievements in the field of beauty, the achievements of all ages, countries and nations. The range of our observations has expanded and broadened extraordinarily and has ceased to be confined to the art of our next-door neighbours. All this prompts us to make comparisons, to contrast separate religions of beauty, their merits, and the advantages of these over those.⁸

The above passage makes it clear that for Matvejs himself, the art of Africa, Oceania, Asia and other regions, was vital for a complete appreciation of "the field of beauty," and being able to observe this art and compare and contrast it, was not only vital but possible. Where was it possible for him to see this art?

From June 1912 Matvejs stayed for 5 months in Paris, making numerous sketches of Montmartre, in particular the rue Lamarck and the Sacre-Coeur, and using them later for his graduate work. Before going to France we know that he visited



Wood sculpture from Easter Island, from Matvejs' book, *The Art of Easter Island*, courtesy of the Latvian National Library.

Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne, making contacts with German artists Vasilij Kandinsky, Frank Mark and Herwalth Walden⁹, members of the group "Der Blaue Reiter," and proposed that they take part in a group exhibition. The Union of Youth also had the idea of establishing a contemporary art museum. At the same time, as we know from letters, Matvejs spent a lot of time in libraries and bookshops. In common with many artists of that period, when in Paris he visited the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero and other public ethnographic art collections. The letters written in Paris give a particularly clear and detailed picture of Matvejs' life and interests. For example:

Regarding purchases, here are a lot of interesting things, but what can I buy having 120 roubles. Just one exam-

ple to illustrate my situation. Editor (Wolf) visited one scraper, who sells only Picassos and has all photos of Picasso works, all periods. They are interesting and I am considering buying something. Then along came Shchukin and we (Nikolaj Vasilyevich Kandaurov and I) started to tell him what wonderful African and Polynesian sculpture we found at other scrapers - amazing things and cheap - 50, 100, 300 francs. We went there with Shchukin and he bought sculptures and a Picasso paying 600 francs. But what can I do with my 120 roubles! If I had a camera, I would take some pictures of these wonders.¹⁰

But colleagues in Moscow didn't respond in time. Matvejs, being impatient and disappointed by their silence, wrote again on 16 July, 1912:

I wander around endless amounts of bookshops . . . I must write about the principles of the new art and there is material here. What wonderful African and Polynesian sculpture one can buy . . . it's lucky you gave me so little money for I wouldn't have been able to stop myself . . . Even so my soul trembles at the thought. I can only buy rubbish — works by the Futurists and Picasso — rubbish compared with the sculptures.¹¹

Matvejs returned to Russia in the late October of 1912. That autumn he again took part in different events organized by The Union of Youth, at the same time attending lectures at the Art Academy. But around December of that year Matvejs began to drift away from the activities of The Union of Youth. The fact was that he wanted to pay more attention to his theoretical research, concentrating on the basic plastic principles involved in painting, sculpture and architecture in an attempt to

penetrate their essence. Matvejs' main goal was no less than to discover and to analyze the essential elements in the creation of art. This purpose sets Matvejs' work apart from other ethnographic studies. His focus was on the material and texture and their manipulation, with examples taken from many different regions and cultures.

The breadth of Matvejs' search for creative principles was also emphasized by his book *The Art of Easter Island*, which concerns the sculptural art of tiny Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean. It is in such a region and art, far from the homogenizing influence of modern art schools, that Matvejs found and elucidated the principles he considered essential for art.

The Art of Easter Island suffers from a lack of illustrations; there are just 22 photographs, all taken by him in various European ethnographic museums in 1913. Eleven original images correspond to the mere two stones and seven wooden sculptures from Easter Island. The photos of the two stone sculptures were taken at the British Museum in London, and one of the most well-known, Hoa Haka-nanai'a, was featured on the book's cover.¹² As for the wooden sculptures, one was found in the Trocadero, Paris, one in St. Petersburg, two at the British Museum and three in the Leiden ethnographic collection. Matvejs collated most of the available information concerning how and by whom the sculptures were taken to Europe. For example, he recorded that two large stone sculptures were delivered by HMS *Topaze*, which visited Easter Island in 1868.¹³ For his analysis of Easter island art, Matvejs had mostly to rely on the memoirs of missionaries and explorers who, inevitably, paid scant attention to the forms of the art. It proved impossible for Matvejs to find other sources of information because, as he correctly stated: "It is a pity that in European museums there are no details which would allow one to form clear notions concerning the art of this island."¹⁴ Thus Chapter 1 of the essay consists of an essentially historical and ethnographic review of Easter Island civilization. In Chapter 2, however, the study of the stone and wooden sculptures as an art form, was unprecedented. Matvejs constructs a convincing picture of the monumental stone colossi and the smaller wooden structures. He looks at methods and implements of construction, the reasons for the size, the social use and the formal qualities. He questions:



Stone sculpture from Hawaii, from Matvejs' book, *The Art of Easter Island*. (Trocadero photo, courtesy of the Latvian National Library).

What is represented by these sculptures? Some idols? Some past kings, some ancestors, some gods? It is difficult to find the answer; here we may have only conjectures. It is true that these majestic poses, these self-respecting heads, have a lot of power and mightiness, but as we can tell from surviving pedigree records, the sculptures cannot be the images of kings.¹⁵

In the same chapter he considers other possible interpretations, and concludes his reflections with the suggestion that the sculptures could be the images of ancestors.¹⁶ He rightly recognized that the use of material is closely and vitally linked with nature, and he reflected upon the uniqueness and significance of Easter Island sculptures, apart from the other islands of the South Pacific.



Hawaiian stone sculpture from Matvejs' book, *The Art of Easter Island*. (Trocadero photo, courtesy of the Latvian National Library).

At the same time, the book contains examples of wooden and stone sculptures from other Pacific islands. Of course, there are just a few, and most of these were found in the Trocadero, Paris. Eleven original images correspond to eight stone sculptures, including six different views of three sculptures from Hawai'i and two views of an art object from New Hebrides. Three others feature wood sculptures, one from New Zealand, found in Cologne, one from the Marquesas Islands and one from New Guinea, both of which were in the Trocadero. Matvejs makes an attempt at analyzing and describing exceptional features that these sculptures have in common; for exam-

ple, he recognizes that the items from New Zealand and the Marquesas have similar formal characteristics and are so covered with decorative marks that they almost lose their original form.¹⁷ He finishes his studies with the conclusion that the art of Oceania probably has several distinct traditions, but that the subject has been poorly investigated.

As may be seen, in spite of many difficulties, Matvejs made a brave attempt to describe the plastic qualities, unravel the heritage and assess the significance of the art of Easter Island and Oceania. Also we have to remember that although *The Art of Easter Island* does not boast any claim of relevance to modern art, its exposition of the creative forms and principles of the Easter Islanders is symptomatic of the modern artists' search for simple faith in nature, and for life outside of the alienating world of industrial society.

At the beginning of the 20th century Voldemars Matvejs

deeply believed that 'the range of our observations has expanded and broadened extraordinarily and has ceased to be confined to the art of our next-door neighbours.'¹⁸ Thus let me conclude with the hope that the discovery of Matvejs' book might arouse a larger interest in it and in Matvejs' ideas, despite the fact that he comes from a far distant country. I believe the book will make a significant addition to the area of Easter Island cultural studies. The 21st century has just started, and Matvejs' goal of reassessing all world art continues apace. What an exciting time this is!

FOOTNOTES

¹ For a fuller discussion of the meaning of the term "primitive" used in art history, especially in the context of the relationship between modernism and tribal art, see: William Rubin, *Modernist Primitivism, in "Primitivism in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern"* [Exhibition catalogue]. NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 1-7. [See also Notes & Comments on pp. 74-75.].

² It appears that French scholars are abandoning the term "primitive", replaced by *arts premiers*. See: the interview with J. Kerchache in "Les Arts Premiers au Louvre", numéro spécial de *Connaissance des Arts*, Paris, 2000, pp. 30-32.

³ Cited in: Jean-Louis Paudrat, "The Arrival of Tribal Objects in the West from Africa," in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* [see Note 1, above], p. 149.

⁴ V. Markov (V. Matvejs), *Iskusstvo Negrov*. Petersburg, 1919, p. 109. A translation of this book, by Jacqueline & Jean-Louis Paudrat, exists in French. See: Markov V. "L'Art des Negres". *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne. Histoire & Theorie de l'Art*, 1979, No. 2, pp. 319-327.

⁵ This article exists in English translation. See: Voldemars Matvejs' "The Russian Secession", translated by J. Howard in "Experiment. A Journal of Russian Culture", Published by the Institute of Russian Modern Culture, Los Angeles, 1995, Vol. I.: 46-53.

⁶ This article exists also in English translation. See: V. Markov' *The Principles of the New Art, 1912, in Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and criticism. 1902 -1934*. Edited by J. E. Bowlt, Thames & Hudson, 1988 [2nd ed.]: 23-38.

⁷ Varvara Bubnova, (1886 -1983), an artist, was born in St. Petersburg. She studied at the Drawing School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, then at St. Petersburg Academy of Arts (1907-1914). She moved to Moscow in 1917 and in 1922 to Japan. She returned to Suchumi (former Soviet Union, now Georgia) in 1958 and finally St. Petersburg in 1979. Her *Memoirs of V. Matvejs* were written in the 1960s. See: "Uroki postizheniya. Hudozhnik Varvara Bubnová.Vospominaniya. Statji. Pisma." Sost. Kozhevnikova Irina, Moskva, 1994:63-79.

⁸ Cited in: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and criticism. 1902 -1934*. [see above, Note 6]: 26.

⁹ For Matvejs' contacts with German artists see letter dated 29 July, 1912, from Kandinsky to Matvejs, including mention of Picasso, African art and a book on Cubism. The Russian Museum, Fond 121, op. 1, ed. khr. 31, cited in E. Kovtun. "V. Markov i otkritije afrikanskogo iskusstva," *Pamyatniki Kulturny*. Novye otkitiya 1980, 1981: 413-414.

¹⁰ Letter to Levkii Ivanovich Zhererzheev (1881-1942), a collector of stage designs. He contributed funds to the Union of Youth and subsidized its two theatrical productions. *The Central State Archive of Art and Literature (CGALI)*, Fond 99, op. 1, ed. khr. 438, 1.2.

¹¹ Letter to Zheverzheev. The Bakhrushin Central State Theatrical Mu-

seum, Moscow, Fond 99, op.1, ed.khr.59, l.1.

¹² Because of Matvejs' theoretical interests, a number of images were omitted from his book. Nine images of Hoa Haka-nanai'a have survived and are in the Latvian National Library collection. In several of them, some parts of the sculpture are out of sequence, and not all are in good condition. One more detail—the images for the book are on a far smaller scale and don't show the surroundings, which are so important and interesting from a contemporary point of view.

¹³ See: Vladimir Markov (Voldemars Matvejs), "Iskusstvo ostrova Pashi", Izdaniye " Soyuz Molodezhi", Saint Petersburg, 1914: 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., 37.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Cited in: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism. 1902-1934.* [see Note 6]:26.

Editor's Note: The catalogue, "Voldemars Matvejs, Latvian painter, art historian and critic, 1877-1914," is written by Irēna Bužinska. Parts of the catalogue are in 3 languages: Latvian, Swedish and English – (the main article and Matvejs' biography). Other sections are in Latvian and Swedish. Published by Gotland Art Museum; April 14-June 18, 2000. Only 500 copies of the catalogue were printed; a few are left. For information concerning the catalogue, contact Irēna Bužinska at <ibuzinska@parks.lv> As for the original book by Matvejs, this is more than 'rare': of the 500 copies printed in 1914, and aside from Bužinska's copy, only one other is known to exist, at the National Library of Russia in Moscow.

All photo reproductions are by Georgij Jemelyanov. Bužinska wishes to express her gratitude to Steve Cotton for help and corrections with the English text.

Notes From Our Readers

The Sixth Polynesian Languages Forum on Rapa Nui Kaliko S.C. Trapp

The 24th day of March 2000 saw a group of about 50 people descend upon Rapa Nui in a wave of excitement and anticipation, as the 6th meeting of the Polynesian Languages Forum was to be held in Hanga Roa from the 27th to the 30th. Coming from all corners of Oceania, the delegates and their associates found themselves quickly welcomed to the homes of local residents, and it wasn't long before all were happily settled in with the Rapa Nui hosts.

The Polynesian Languages Forum is led by president Rodrigo Paoa Atamu of Rapa Nui—who is also the president of Mata Nui 'a Hotu 'a Matu'a o Kahu-Kahu o Hera—and secretary general Larry Lindsey Kimura of Hawai'i. The Forum was founded as a non-governmental assembly of representatives of all Polynesian peoples. It concerns itself with the preservation of the native Polynesian languages in the modern day and into the future. Due to the broad use of English, French, or Spanish in the education of young Polynesians today, as well as the coming

of television and other forms of mass media into the home, young generations are turning away from their native languages as principal forms of communication. The general movement towards English has affected all levels of society in both Hawai'i and Aotearoa, where the ratio of native speakers to English speakers is very low; and it is precisely those two island groups that now lead the way in "immersion education" of the local children in their native tongues.

Prior to the meetings, the visitors were treated to a two-day tour of the island, from Hanga Roa to 'Anakena, from Tongariki to Ahu Te Peu. Legendary stories were told in the traditional language of Rapa Nui, and adeptly translated by cheery local interpreters. Those same translators were on hand throughout the meetings to provide simultaneous translations of the proceedings. While sight-seeing, all were in high spirits, despite the occasional impetuous rain squalls. The meeting was officially blessed on the 26th, in the blackness of night before the *moai* at Tahai, the only light being that which lit the stony face and torso of that great statue as it watched over the activities below.

The Rapa Nui delegation consisted of 12 people, including Alberto Hotus Chávez, president of the Council of Elders; Sergio Rapu Haoa, archaeologist; Hilaria Tuki Pakarati, immersion preschool teacher; and several other Rapa Nui language teachers. Also in attendance was one member from American-Samoa; six from Aotearoa; two from the Cook Islands; six from Hawai'i; seven from the Henua 'Enana (Marquesas); three from Mangareva; two from Rurutu; three from the Tuamotu Islands; and about eight from Tahiti. Both Governor Jacobo Hey Paoa, and Mayor Pedro Edmunds Paoa made appearances. The meeting was convened at the new "Hare Korohua" just uphill from the church at the top of Te Pito o Te Henua Street, and the recently established Rapa Nui branch of the Chilean Red Cross (see *Rapa Nui Journal* Vol. 14:1, p.26) took responsibility for distributing refreshments.

The meeting of the ten island groups provided for the discussion of matters ranging from the socio-linguistic pressures in language choice and the viability of native languages in the modern day, to immersion-education pedagogy and the creation of new lexicon and lesson examples. Proposals were made for mutual assistance, and significant news from the Polynesian islands was heard. On a more personal level however, it was an opportunity to get together and share stories and videos with one another and talk of life in the islands. It was a time for "the universal language of mankind", as Longfellow put it, as all enjoyed the musical harmony of so many Polynesian voices.

Indeed, right up to the last minute at the Mataveru airport, the gracious Rapa Nui people would burst into song, and the other delegations would give extemporaneous speeches or dance for the moment. The whole experience was heart-warming and enlightening, and helped to further the bonds of aloha and friendship that continue the legacy of Polynesian brotherhood and mutual respect. The next meeting is to be held in either American-Samoa or in the Cook Islands in March 2002.

Kaliko S.C. Trapp is a teacher at a Hawaiian Language Immersion School in Kea'au, Puna, Hawai'i. He was part of the delegation from Hawai'i.