

NATIVES, TOURISTS, AND SPIRITS

Contemporary Existences in Rapa Nui

SURF Conference Panel Session 7A

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May 28th, 2013: *Eddie suddenly turned around. "It is past midnight. Tell them to get out of here! You are not from here, Pablo. When you are not from here the 'varua' take heed of you and follow you into your dreams."*¹

My research takes place on Easter Island, located in the South Pacific Ocean. However, it is more precise to say that my research takes place at the intersection of "Easter Island" and "Rapa Nui." I argue that these two names constitute two different spatial imaginaries that have historically developed around the island I study.

On the one hand, "Easter Island" is the place that 80,000 or so tourists choose to visit each year.² Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen, who discovered the island for Europe on Easter Day in 1722, coined the name "Easter Island."³ It is close to the District of Columbia in size and, in high season, at any one time, the odds are that there are more tourists than natives.^{4, 5} "Easter Island" has a capital, called Hanga Roa, an airport, and eight thousand "archaeological sites."⁶

"Rapa Nui," on the other hand, is the place the Rapa Nui know. The indigenous inhabitants coined the name "Rapa Nui" in 1862 to refer to themselves and their island. "Rapa Nui" speaks to a place that is a boundless cosmos: according to the oral tradition, it is *Te Pito O Te Henua*, "The Navel of the World."⁷ Rapa Nui is host to 3,000 or so natives (according to the last census) and innumerable mythical beings.⁸ The map (Figure 1) shows that each place on "Rapa Nui" has a name; *every* stone is an archaeological feature.⁹ 1862 is also the year that slave raiders on Easter

1 Eddie Tuki Hito. May 28th, 2013. Interview by Pablo Seward.

2 Sebastián Paoa. "Llegada de Turistas a Establecimientos de Turístico de Isla de Pascua 2012, Por Mes y Según Nacionalidad" Hanga Roa: SERNATUR, 2013.

3 Alfred Métraux. *Easter Island*. (Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1957), 34

4 Claudio Cristino. "Easter Island Statue Project," Last modified on 10 June 2005, <http://www.eisp.org/3126/>

5 Sebastián Paoa. "Llegada de Turistas..."

6 Rapu, Sergio. June 27th, 2013. *Hotel Tupa*. Informal interview by Pablo Seward.

7 William J. Thompson. *Te Pito O Te Henua, or Easter Island* [1891]. "Various Names of the Island", <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/ei/ei04.htm>>

8 Mauricio Silva. "Isla de Pascua duplica su población..." 5 September 2012. <http://www.plataformaurbana.cl/archive/2012/09/05/isla-de-pascua-duplica-su-poblacion-en-veinte-anos-por-fuerte-migracion-desde-el-continente/>

9 Jacinta Arthur. "Now They Say the Land Is Not Ours: On Rapanui Worldviews and Land-Being Relations". (PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles 2012), 13

that the spatial imaginaries of “Easter Island” and “Rapa Nui” are best understood as the result of dichotomous discursive formations. Scholars were the constitutive force behind the first of these discursive formations, in particular behind the turn it has taken in the contemporary world as what has been called a “Museum Island.”¹² In the second half of the 20th century, archaeologists transformed Rapa Nui indigenous places into an enormous open-air museum, meeting the formidable demands of cultural tourists around the globe.¹³ The process began when renowned ethnographer-adventurer Thor Heyerdahl visited the island in 1955. Heyerdahl was the first Westerner to re-erect a *moʻai*, human monoliths conceived to serve as place-markers for the spirit of important ancestors, at Anakena beach. His best-seller *Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island* (1962) opened “Easter Island” to a panoply of visitors.¹⁴ Today, generations of scholars have restored all major *moʻai* platforms, and have constructed a solid field of knowledge around “Easter Island,” to the point that many Rapa Nui directed me to foreign resident scholars to inquire about the island’s lost past. The spatial imaginary formulated by the discourse of “Easter Island” even became a virtual reality in the 1994 movie *Rapa-Nui*.¹⁵

Unlike the discursive formation of “Easter Island,” that of “Rapa Nui” is based on oral history and other mnemonic devices that are more difficult to track. I investigate how the Rapa Nui are today conceiving, producing, and circulating knowledge-practices of memory that discursively form an ever more verisimilar (and therefore powerful) spatial imaginary. I investigate the role of the notion of *varua* in this process.

II. Methodology

During June and July 2013, I carried out six weeks of participant observation among the Rapa Nui of Easter Island, during which time I engaged in fifty informal interviews. Over the course of my interactions with the Rapa Nui, *varua* came to signify the spirits of ancestors who remain on the island after death.

III. Findings and Analysis

Three major themes emerged from my analysis of my fieldwork.

(1) For the Rapa Nui, memory is conceived as a knowledge-practice. Indeed, the Rapa Nui term for memory, *maʻu aʻau*, is rooted in the term for “to know,” or *maʻu*.¹⁶ In Rapa Nui, in other words, “to know” is “to remember.” Remembrance in Rapa Nui, in turn, is a function of place, such that each place on the island evokes a certain memory; memory is something you practice as you move from place to place around the island. The past takes the form of *aʻamu*, or tales, which most often narrate an encounter with one or more *varua* and which are told in the place they once occurred. The landscape in Rapa Nui is thus better understood as a “memoryscape,” which both shapes and is shaped by the past.¹⁷ As a result, any contemporary modifications to their

12 Steven Fisher. *Island At the End of the World*, 200.

13 Douglas Porteous. *The Modernization of Easter Island*. (Victoria: Western Geographical Series Vol. 19, 1981), 191.

14 Steven Fisher. *Island At the End of the World*, 200.

15 *Rapa-Nui* (1994), directed by Kevin Reynolds, and co-produced by Kevin Costner.

16 “Englert Dictionary”. Last modified on 3 July 2011. <<http://kohaumotu.org/Rongorongo/Dictionary/index.html>>

17 Jacinta Arthur. “Now They Say the Land Is Not Ours,” 13.

landscape, like those wrought by tourism, change the Rapa Nui's memroyscape and therefore their past. If landscape is a temporal milieu for the Rapa Nui person, then modifications of the landscape constitute a sort of ontological limbo for the Rapa Nui.

The *manutara* bird petroglyph (Figure 2) serves as an exemplar of the process by which the Rapa Nui incorporate the impacts of tourism on their landscape into a new memroyscape.



Figure 2. Photo of the main *manutara* petroglyphs located at the Orongo ceremonial site. Source: <http://www.honolulumagazine.com/Honolulu-Magazine/August-2011/Easter-Island-Controversy/> Photo by Terry Hunt.

These petroglyphs have become, according to the spatial imaginary of “Easter Island,” “relics of the past” that reference an ancestral ritual known by scholars and tourists as the “Birdman cult.”¹⁸ But for some Rapa Nui today, the *manutara* is not a relic of the past. Such is the case with Hapa Tepano, considered one of the official transmitters of Rapa Nui medicine. In an interview, Hapa told me about a dream of hers:

I saw birds of steel. Birds of steel bombarding this beautiful culture of mine, this beautiful people, this beautiful land of ours. Birds of steel everywhere.¹⁹

Hapa later revealed to me that in her dream she travelled to the ceremonial site of Orongo (where most *manutara* petroglyphs are located). There, the *varua* communicated the image of “birds of steel” to her. I interpret this image as representing all those who reach Rapa Nui by airplane and who bombard the Rapa Nui with questions and answers, inventions and fads. By using the notion of *varua* to re-conceive such an important landmark as the *manutara*, if Hapa is successful in communicating the image in question to her people, she will enable the collective remembrance of a past and re-imagination of a place different than those propagated by the

18 Katherine Routledge. *The Mystery of Easter Island*. (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney, ld., 1914), 254.

19 Hapa Tepano. June 17th, 2013. Interview by Pablo Seward

tourism industry.

(2) The reason that *aʻamu* (stories) are told in the place they originally occurred is because each time they are told, the events happen again, in a re-instantiation of a new reality.²⁰ *Kai kai*, a Rapa Nui form of folklore, consists of an iconographic performance of an *aʻamu* by means of string figures. The person seen in the image below (Figure 3) is Isabel Pakarati, widely considered as the master of *kai kai* alive today.



Figure 3. Isabel Pakarati performing *kai kai Ko Kuha Ko Rati*.
Source: Photo taken by the author.

The string figures Isabel is showing literally represent *varua*, in this case the seductive hair of two *varua* that are the protagonists of the *aʻamu* Isabel is performing, *Ko Kuha Ko Rati*. *Kai kai* is always accompanied by a *pataʻutaʻu*, or recitation, that elicits the pertinent *varua*, who then re-enact the *aʻamu* by means of string figures.²¹ *Kai kai* is alive and opens up a space where an alternative discursive formation may be produced. The rhythmical movement that according to Joel Huke characterizes *kai kai* is a method to entrance the viewer and to enable him or her to engage with the *varua*, produce new memories, and re-imagine the place as “Rapa Nui.”²²

(3) It seems to be the case that once alternative knowledge-practices of memory are conceived and produced, and need only be *circulated*, they may enter spaces whose creation was enabled by the economics and politics of cultural tourism. Instances include auditoriums at hotels, the museum, and the local *Manukena* Radio. Regarding the latter, in such a small community as Rapa Nui, information often travels faster by word-of-mouth than through radio waves. Thus the radio may be used by the Rapa Nui less to inform than to officialize a certain communal position, sometimes with respect to a re-imagined past.

Another instance merits more attention. Te Pou Huke, an internationally recognized Rapa Nui artist, shared with me an upcoming project of his: In November 2013, Te Pou presented an exposition of 40 paintings depicting controversial events in Rapa Nui history in the lobby of *Hotel Vai Moana*. One of his paintings depicts Heyerdahl in a “Wanted” sign “to show the dark side of Heyerdahl’s work.”²³ Te Pou then revealed to me that his paintings are inspired by his routine morning talks with the *varua*, yet they play no explicit role in Te Pou’s exposition. Stripped from its conception and production in the esoteric world of *varua*, the circulation of

20 Jacinta Arthur, “Now They Say the Land Is Not Ours,” 25.

21 Pakarati, Isabel. July 5th, 2013. Performance recorded by Pablo Seward.

22 Joel Huke. June 22nd, 2013. Interview by Pablo Seward.

23 Te Pou Huke. June 18th, 2013. Interview by Pablo Seward.

knowledge-practices of memory around “Rapa Nui” is thus open to all people, not just to Rapanui people. This allows the spatial imaginary of “Rapa Nui” the potential to become global. It may not be far-fetched to think that just as the *Rapa-Nui* movie objectified the discursive formation of the island as “Easter Island,” Te Pou’s exhibition seeks to objectify the discursive formation of the island as “Rapa Nui.”

IV. Conclusion

In the opening scene of this paper, Eddie implored me to “tell them to get out of here!” in reference to the *varua*. Why did Eddie want them to leave if, according to my study, the *varua* are positive agents of change in Rapa Nui? Unlike most of the thousands of studies done on Easter Island so far, my study does not focus on the ruins of the past. It focuses on the ruins of the present. But I do not pretend to open the eyes of the Rapa Nui to the inestimable ruins of their present through my research. For all I know, the many cautions I received (that talking about the *varua* in interviews may actually invoke the *varua* and that they can hurt me) took effect one night, when I suddenly got food poisoning while listening to an *aʻamu* in a cave. Perhaps the shadows of my antecessors like Heyerdahl and many others enticed the *varua* to attack. Perhaps, too, the *varua* were tormenting Eddie for hosting me, and that is why he wanted them to leave. In an era when indigenous peoples have at least superficially gained some human rights and have some sort of voice, why should an anthropologist speak for them?

In writing this piece, I am engaging in a knowledge-practice about Rapa Nui culture. I, an outsider, am conceiving, producing, and circulating knowledge about the Rapa Nui on a platform we legitimize as “research,” in a language—English—that most Rapa Nui cannot read. I went to “Easter Island,” and think it disrespectful to say that I came back from “Rapa Nui” after only six weeks of participant observation. I am writing about the Rapa Nui, but not for the Rapa Nui, and not necessarily as the Rapa Nui see themselves. Mine is therefore yet another intrusive imaginary over the Rapa Nui landscape. The ethical stakes for an anthropologist in the 21st century are high, but higher are the consequences of his or her negligence. Though anthropologists are no longer in the position of reducing non-Western cultures to Western structures (or post-structures to that matter), we are still in the privileged position of outsiders as insiders and insiders as outsiders. And our duty is to be conscious of that position, not to ignore it.

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