

Artists of Easter Island

Recuperating their Culture-- or Reinventing it?

by Paul Trachtman, © 2004

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The giant stone statues that haunt the coast of Easter Island, the work of ancient artists, remain fixed in the world's mind as icons of the island's mystery and romance. But Easter Island, known to its native people as Rapa Nui, is alive with contemporary artists who are reviving their culture in the shadow of their spectacular past. Katherine Routledge's remark about Rapa Nui in 1914, that "the inhabitants of today are less real than the men who have gone," prefaced an age of archeology and studies of culture that has often adopted her attitude. It is often assumed that little of the ancient culture is alive on the island now, that the traditions were lost. In interviews with contemporary Rapa Nui artists and cultural leaders, they voice many points of view about this, reflecting the richness of the island's reviving culture.

For Benedicto Tuki Tepano, one of the oldest wood carvers on the island, the traditional knowledge of his ancestors is alive in his hands as he carves, and in his words when he speaks. One morning at Ahu Akivi, he names each of the moai, and explains why they face the ocean and gaze out on the distant islands where the first Rapa Nui came from. "This is not written down," he says. "I know the story because my grandmother taught me before she died." A few days later, he squats against his tin workshop when I arrive. He is carving a moai kavakava. I read to him from the text of a catalog for the recent exhibition of Rapa Nui art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: "Little is known about the precise functions of moai kavakava." He frowns. "They don't know what the true story is," he says, "because they never come to ask me. Never."

Some leading scientists who have worked on the island dismiss such knowledge. One states that Benedicto Tuki's story of Ahu Akivi was made up about 40 years ago. Another says the moai at Ahu Akivi are not facing the ocean, but their inland village. Another says flatly: "The traditions are gone now. Nothing you hear on Easter Island today has any traditional basis." And some islanders tend to agree. Rapa Nui archeologist Sergio Rapu is one. "What you have is reinventing the culture," he says. "From an academic point of view, the problem is to clearly define what is added, and what is continuing. As scientists we don't think it is negative, it's just reality. But the people in the culture don't like to say we're reinventing, because they want to validate something. The people are feeling a lack of what they lost. If you say reinventing, it's losing, weakening. So you have to say, sure, that's Rapa Nui culture. It's a necessity."

For younger generations of Rapa Nui, the stories of elders and the findings of scientists are not so much contradictions as parts of a composite, living truth. Talking to painters, carvers, tattooists, dancers, singers, musicians and others breathing new life into the culture, I'm struck by their way of incorporating both legend and science into their own points of view. Carolina Edwards, who dances with the Kari Kari group, says she gets ideas for new dances by collecting stories from island elders, like the traditional singer Papa Kiko Pate, and also from the pages of classic early studies by authors such as

Routledge and Metraux. "And everybody creates the dances," she says. "We all talk about the story, the song, the meaning, what kind of movement to use."

Similarly, Andreas "Panda" Pakarati, who says he's the first tattooist on Rapa Nui in 100 years, takes his petroglyph patterns both from the rocks and from books. "Other people, like Georgia Lee, have done work on petroglyphs and put them in books. I look at all the old documents, like Thompson, Routledge, and Pierre Loti. I read all these books.

"When Pierre Loti came to the island, he probably saw the last tattoo master here. I started when I was about 15 years old because I saw some books, and I liked it. Later I met some people from Hawaii and other islands and they taught me their techniques. Now the tattoo is reborn."

A wood carver as well as tattooist, Panda believes that Rapa Nui culture can be preserved in books, but can only be understood by practicing it. "A lot of people talk about the culture," he says, "but they don't do anything, they don't practice it. And if you want to have the right to talk about it, you have to do something. Because when you make a carving, or anything else, you know how hard the work is to learn. You know how much you don't know, and you never talk again. To make a carving is like a little sacrifice."

In the studios of young Rapa Nui painters, the imagery of the past is incorporated but not copied. "I paint because I appreciate my culture," says Cristian Silva. "The moai are really cool, but we have other stuff we can paint, that nobody knows. I get stories from my friends, from the old people, and this is my point to start to paint something new. It's new and it's traditional. It's not only one point of view, it's all of them."

Silva shares a studio with another painter, Gustavo Borquez, who says that his contemporary innovations are always embedded in island traditions. "With a piece of paper and a pencil one can obtain a personal freedom," he has written under one of his drawings. "Art is a form of expression that can't be bought or even studied, but only felt." As he shows me this drawing, of an ancient Rapa Nui man, he talks about his own attempts to find freedom within his tradition. "When I work on Rapa Nui subjects I can't escape that context," he says. "I'm involved in it all the time. So even if I'm not thinking about the culture, I'm still inevitably connected to it, even if I don't want to be."

Their mentor, artist Cristian Arevelo Pakarati, looks at the art of the past as a guide for doing new things. "We feel connected to all the ancestral things," he says. "On this island you can't escape that. But we transform all those patterns, interpret them from a different point of view. In my painting, for example, I'm making innovations but they are always connected to the traditional culture. I get those innovations and ideas from my ancient vision."

Some of Pakarati's paintings seem like a form of Polynesian surrealism, with his ancient vision just beneath the surface. All these artists share an ability to see with many points of view. The tattooist Panda Pakarati expresses this way of seeing in his admiration for Picasso's cubism. He sees the faces of the moai as abstractions of individual faces, and thinks the masters who carved the moai shared with Picasso a way of representing a recognizable, particular person in abstract form. "You can make a moai," he says, "and you know that moai represents him, or him, or him. All the moai on the island have different Rapanui faces. You don't have to do the same as nature to show this. It's the same as Picasso painting a woman he liked. You could see a photograph of the woman, and you could see the painting, and the painting is cubist, completely abstract, but the woman is this woman, no other woman. It's the face of the woman, but with all the points of view. It is the same with the moai."

Cristian Pakarati has witnessed and participated in extensive work by modern archeologists, and he has made some 2000 detailed drawings of the moai, recording measurements and ratios essential for scientific analysis. But he sees other dimensions in

his culture, as well. Reflecting on the different theories archeologists have suggested for how the moai were transported, he says, "Sometimes I think they make things complicated because they are archeologists. It's their work. I mean, you're not going to go back to the United States and say I have discovered how they moved the statues: it was just with two poles!

"When I was a child I always asked this question of the old people," he says.

"And they told me that they moved the statue with mana. Well, mana for me in those times used to be supernatural power, some overwhelming kind of magic. And that was enough for me, when I was a child. Then I grew up, I went to school, and later I got to thinking about that question and I'd think those old men have been tricking me, telling me they moved the statue with mana. That's stupid. How can you move the statue with mana? But then several years ago I saw a dictionary written down by the Council of Elders, and it says that mana doesn't mean only supernatural power. Mana means many other things, like magic, like power, like technology, like being intelligent. It's a word that holds so many meanings. So, I was wrong when I was a child, and those people were right to tell me that they moved it with mana. Because mana means power, and power means intelligence. They moved it with intelligence."

Pakarati sees part of the truth about Rapa Nui culture in scientific archeology, part in the stories of the old people, and part remaining a mystery. "My grandmother didn't tell me everything," he says, "because she didn't know it." And, he adds, the scientists don't know everything they think they know. He points to a stone structure called a boat house. "They say that these usually belonged to the aristocratic families. They make this hard separation between the different strata in society, and because a house looks a bit nice, it must have belonged to an aristocratic family. It didn't happen! I think anybody, even a guy from a lower clan, could easily carve this stone and make a better house for his family. I don't agree with the archeologists when they always write that the boat houses belonged to the aristocratic families. That's awful!"

For Pakarati and the island's younger generations, the search for truth about their culture is an essential part of their work, whether they are turning stories into dances, or paintings, or guiding tourists around the island. "When I'm guiding tourists around the quarry, explaining how the statues probably were carved, I'm making the culture, or keeping the culture," he says. "I'm giving you information about the old times, but even myself, I'm not sure about it. So if you're born as a Rapanui, your homework is to find out what was going on here, and to try to keep on with that.

"What I'm saying now is going to change for the next generation. The archeologists are still digging, discovering things. The information I have, taken from all that, mixed with what I've gotten from my family and the other families I know, is not necessarily the whole truth. It's just a point of view. And obviously my child is going to be richer than me in that kind of knowledge, because there will be more technology, more things will be found, so you'll have more interpretations. It will enrich her vocabulary about the culture."

Carolina Edwards, working to preserve the stories and songs of old people on the island, also teaches dance to preschool children who will one day continue the culture. When I go with her to the home of the island's oldest singer, Papa Kiko Pate, I get a chance to see their deep mutual respect for each other as he sings about the old ways of the island, and she asks many questions. She is inspired as we leave, imagining a new dance for Kari Kari. But the work isn't always like this, she admits. "Sometimes the old people don't know the answers to our questions," she says. "They don't remember, and they want to answer us, so they make things up."

She also says that many of the old songs and stories have a truth you realize only by living in the culture. One Kari Kari dance, for example, is called The Future Teller. In

this story, a woman of past centuries tells of boats coming to the island to carry people off, and of an animal with a long face, and of dwellings you won't have to crawl into-- foretelling the slave raids, the arrival of the horse, and houses with doors.

Everyone on the island seems to know people with such vision. Benedicto Tuki tells me he can see in the clouds when somebody is going to die. "You can know that a man or woman will die in a day, or two days, and whether they'll die from a natural cause or an accident," he says. "In Rapa Nui Culture you can know that. You don't know who, but you can know if it's your relative." Cristian Pakarati relates his own experience. "Well, I know that those kinds of things existed here in the early times," he says. "And I saw it myself with my own eyes. I knew an old woman who said to a young man that you are going to die in the afternoon. And he went away, and turned up dead in the afternoon. I was with him that morning, and he looked okay. And then he went for a ride on horseback, and he was killed by the horse. I was there and I felt it, I saw it, and I've got nothing else to say!" He laughs, and then adds another fact of Rapa Nui culture that I have not seen recorded, even in the early anthropological literature.

"People here believe in ghosts, in witches, in some superpower that is moving things around, in magic," he says. "And they believe in their identity as an animal. Every man has an animal as a soul. Before you're born, your mother usually dreams about an animal, it could be a bird, a lizard, a rat, a chicken, a dog or whatever it is. So, when you're born, your spirit and your behavior becomes that animal. Later, when the child understands, she tells what is his animal. We call those kinds of things here your po, your judgement or fate. That's a powerful thing that is always with us, and we carry with us all the time. We don't talk too much about it, but everybody knows that it exists."

The layers of science and tradition in Pakarati's mind seem almost mystifying, until he starts to explain the history of an ahu we are looking at. What he is saying about the ahu, I realize, is a metaphor for himself. "Every site has different levels," he explains, "and underneath any site there are still materials from the past, say the tenth century, and then you get other strata from later centuries up to the 16th, which is what you are seeing now. What you see is not apparently what it is. What you see is the last stage, not a unique stage."

Later, he makes the metaphor explicit. "Most of my generation is basing their art and even behavior on the scientific information from the past archeologists, not only from what our parents and grandparents said, which is not necessarily true. What you get from the older people is the feeling, the feeling of being a Rapa Nui. But now, later, you need to be responsible for being a Rapa Nui. You need to be more exact. It seems that people are not coming here for the mystery, anymore. They are coming here to find answers."

Another of Pakarati's generation, his friend Rene Edmunds, echoes these words on another occasion as he grills an abundance of fish he has just speared off the coast. "You have to mix oral history with the scientists' theories," he says, "because many things in our history have changed with time, because there are many layers in Rapa Nui, and every layer is true! For me and for many other young people, we have to learn from strangers, from scientists, from books, and from our culture, our blood. You have to mix all of that, and finally you find your personal point of view."

At times, traditional and scientific interpretations of Rapa Nui culture meet in unexpected ways. Sergio Rapu recalls how he worked as an assistant to William Mulloy at Tahai, when he was about 22 years old, and how Mulloy virtually adopted him and guided him through a B.A. in Wyoming and a Masters in archeology at the East West Center in Hawaii. Mulloy died shortly after Rapu came back and started excavating and restoring Anakena. Mulloy had always been looking for the eyes of the moai, but had never found any in his 18 years of research on the ahu. Rapu inherited the quest.

"We were excavating Anakena," he recalls, "right after Bill passed away, and for several weeks we were finding fragments of coral that had a triangular end, and every time I looked at a fragment I thought it was a coral file, because in old Polynesian records you have coral files used to smooth off things. We collected all of these and kept them in the museum. And next to that we were also collecting some discs of brownish material, which is red scoria, and it looked like an old game we have in Hawaii, so I put them in a bag and labeled it as probably a game. Until one day we uncovered a statue that fell backward, its face was broken, and under the face of this moai were four fragments of coral practically together.

"I was working with Sonya Haoa, who was studying archeology, and I asked her, Hey, put these things together and see what you get out of it. And then she started playing with it, and got this almond shaped thing. And then she said, Hey we got something! And everybody came running over, and somebody would say, Oh, this is a fish, and the other would say, No, it's a receptacle, because it had an opening in the middle. I didn't know, nobody knew, what it was.

"At lunchtime, I took the thing to the museum, and I was happy because I had something to exhibit, since I was running the museum. At the moment I was stepping out my pickup, it just clicked in my mind--the shape of the eye concavity in the moai we'd already erected on the platform, and I got goose bumps all over. I said, this could be the eyes of that thing. So I called a girl working there and asked her to pull out all those coral files and all those game pieces, and nervously started putting the things out and looking at the shapes. So we found out there were seven eyes. But I thought, we have to be objective, and I picked up a tape measure and found it was 32 centimeters long and 19 wide. So I was going to go back to the site and make sure that the concavity of that moai matched the measurement, before I called the workers and made myself look foolish before them. But I stopped at my wife's office in town, and when I walked into the room all excited with these things in hand, she was sitting with an old man named Jose Fati, who was teaching her Rapa Nui. She was writing down words, and the word he was saying as I stepped in was areoko. Areoko is the white of the eye!

"And I walked over to him and said, Hey, this is the areoko of the moai, and he stood up, half laughing, and he said, Yeah, this is areoko." What Mulloy had been searching for, and what Rapu had found, had always been there in the old man's memory, handed down from his father during a walk among the moai at Ranu Raraku when Jose Fati was about ten years old.

Even for Sergio Rapu, who says the Rapa Nui are reinventing their culture, there is some knowledge that still lies beneath the surface of the island's memory. Katherine Routledge wrote of her 1914 research on the island, "It is even more difficult to collect facts from brains than out of stones." And Alfred Metraux regarded Rapa Nui in 1934 as an arid terrain for anthropology. "I know of few places in the Pacific where so little remains of the ancient culture," he wrote. Were they gathering the last remnants of cultural memory after the 19th Century decimation of the population? Or were they missing something?

Edmundo Edwards, a Chilean archeologist living on Rapa Nui since 1960, says he's witnessed decades of reinvention. "Everybody is trying to recuperate the culture," he says, "but the culture disappeared." He recalls how the first 'traditional' dances on the island were performed in the mid-1960s when Lan Chile started bringing in tourists, and the travel agent who arranged this told a young Kiko Pate, 'We need dances.' Since no one knew any Polynesian dances on the island, he told them, 'Just put on some feathers and dance.'

"But this started again a great creativity in everybody, because they had to perform," Edwards says. "And over time, people started going to the first Pacific Arts

Festivals, and the Rapa Nui began grabbing everything they found interesting in other people's dances, and the result is the modern dances you see today."

Yet today, Papa Kiko Pate insists that the songs on his tongue are telling the ancient stories unchanged, and that the newly improvised dances set to those songs are keeping the traditional culture alive. Mayor Petero Edmunds agrees that ancient knowledge has been kept alive by the Rapa Nui. "There is a technique," he says. "It's music. The history is in the songs. Somebody starts to sing the old tune, then you bring back the words again, and the words are history. That's how it survived.

"And also," says the Mayor, "every rock on the island has a name. If you say a name, everyone knows exactly where it is, and the names of places is history." Cristian Pakarati has another way of making the point. "Even now, in modern times," he says, "almost every Rapa Nui on the island knows which ahu belonged to their family in the old times. And even now they don't come in the night to camp in places that don't belong to their ancestors. Because the aku aku, or the ghosts from the old wars, would come to you if you are in the enemy's land. My brain was washed so many times by these old people when I was a child, that I still believe in that and I still feel it." In fact, says Pakarati, the problem is not that the old knowledge has been lost, but that the young people would rather forget it; they just want to go camping and to make a fire anywhere. "We respect what the old people say," he adds, "but we want to change that a bit."

The key date in any discussion of ancient knowledge and contemporary culture is 1877 when a census showed that the Rapa Nui were on the edge of extinction, all but wiped out by exploitation, slave raids and small pox. A frequently published and quoted figure for that census indicates that only 111 natives were left. In fact, says Australian anthropologist Grant McCall, who's research has included Rapa Nui genealogies, there were only 110 natives. He used to think there were 111, until he read the document itself and discovered that the Chilean census taker had counted himself. "Now, you might question the accuracy of the figure," says McCall, "but the published figure itself is, sorry to use the word, a fact!"

It's a small point, but it only points up the difficulties of knowing what that number signifies: the more complicated question of whether Rapa Nui culture was lost, or was passed on to later generations. I contemplate this one morning on the island, talking to a young musician who plays drums with the Kari Kari dancers. Jimmy Araki was born in the United States, and his Rapa Nui mother brought him back to the island when he was ten years old. "My friends at school played guitar, ukelele, and drums," he says, "and I just watched them and started copying them when they'd lend me their instruments. That's the way most of us learn, because we have no schools here to teach people how to play the guitar, how to play anything. When you're a kid you just have to watch, and that's the way you learn."

Araki is now 31, and sees himself as a native trying to keep the culture alive. "We're trying to recuperate all our ancient stuff and put it back together, and give it a new uprising," he says. A little later that day I meet Grant McCall, who first came to the island in 1968 and has returned four times since then, for eighteen months this time. I ask him how he thinks about the culture: could it have been transmitted through those 110 people?

"Well, it only takes two people to transmit a lot of it," he says, "somebody who is speaking and somebody who is listening. Just take an example from a different part of the world, the Shakespearean ballads collected by the Childs from people in the mountains of Tennessee in the 1920s and 1930s. That's after 400 years! They'd lived there for maybe 200 or 300 years, and they were a much deprecated class of people whose singing and behavior and everything else was that of a hillbilly, hick, any kind of defamatory term

you care to put on it. Their culture was certainly not encouraged by the authorities at any point. and their only public persona was a comic strip, Li'l Abner.

"Well, that's where the Childs found the texts to Shakespearean ballads, and not only that, they found the tunes preserved. They didn't have the tunes from Shakespeare's day, and they found the tunes there. They were not adapted from standard European scales, they were ones that Child as a folklorist found surviving only in fragments in England. But it was almost 100 percent intact in this American backwater, with much more opposition and a much longer timescale than we're talking about on Rapa Nui. So if that can happen....

"Okay, here you had a period of time where for much of the 19th Century, islanders did pretty much what they wanted to do. The slave raids are real enough, the disease, the outmigration, the exploitation, including by the Bishop of Tahiti. The priests tried to suppress all knowledge, and some knowledge they did. But they weren't able to destroy all knowledge.

"The missionaries warned people that if they told all these old stories to their children, they'd go to hell. A lot of old people here told me that their older people said, no we can't tell the stories, because if we do we'll go straight to hell. But they figured that it was okay if they talked to each other, and if a child listened while they talked, as long as he stayed out of sight and didn't ask any questions, then he's okay, he's not going to go to hell. And it's not our fault if he picks up the knowledge. That's how it happened."

As for what was lost, there are islanders who do not believe it is lost forever. Benedicto Tuki's daughter, Maria Tuki Pate, is a carver of kohau rongorongo, meticulously inscribing wooden tablets with symbols of the lost language. Although linguists have long tried to decipher the language, this is not her approach. "When I carve the rongorongo," she says, "I am keeping the tradition for my children, to teach them, and one day I may find how to use my mana, my intelligence, to translate for my children and other Rapa Nui children. Now I don't know the meaning. Maybe I have the mana, but I don't know how I can use it. Or maybe it's not yet my time for revelation. I hope one day the gods can give me more power, and I can have more intelligence, to know how I can read the rongorongo and translate it for my children. Every day, this is my work, carving rongorongo."

Other islanders point out that some of what was lost has been preserved in the world's museums, but is not accessible to them or to their children. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition, for example, displayed three feather headdresses for the first time. They were taken from the island by Paymaster Thompson aboard the U.S.S. Mohican in 1886, and kept in storage at the Smithsonian ever since. Cristian Pakarati visited a Smithsonian storeroom as the exhibition was being planned, and was astonished. "I never realized that my people had the kinds of skills to do such things. They were so beautiful, made with a needle, feather by feather, with this little grass cord, and I never knew that! We don't have those kinds of pieces in the museum here. The new generation of Rapa Nui people doesn't know how rich the culture was. There are so many things that are so significant just stored away, and most Rapa Nui people don't know anything about them, they haven't even seen them in pictures."

In talking about the authenticity of their contemporary culture, most Rapa Nui would agree that the role of outside scientists and institutions can contribute to the erosion, or the evolution of the culture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, did not consider it relevant to invite any contemporary Rapa Nui artists to participate in its recent exhibition of the island's traditional art, although the curator hoped that publication of a catalog would be of benefit to those artists. No other museum or university that supports study of Rapa Nui culture is doing any more to support the people who are keeping it alive. As Panda Pakarati points out, "If you see our own

museum, it's probably the most ugly museum of Easter Island art in all the world. There's no excuse for that."

Perhaps part of the problem is the way science often treats culture, as an object--what the cartoonist Steinberg called "frozen music"--instead of as an always-changing stream of consciousness. When Cristian Pakarati thinks of the past, he is also thinking of its future interpretations in his daughter's lifetime. "She is going to make more culture than me," he says. That's the truth. That's evolution. Culture and evolution come together." He's leaning against one of the moai at Ranu Raraku as he says this. "The history is already here," he adds. "We still need to dig a bit to get the whole picture. Probably I won't see it, but in the meantime the mystery of Easter Island brings people here, searching for what we think."

As we survey the slope of the quarry, I ask him what he thinks of the theory that space aliens moved the moai? "That is only another point of view," he says. "I've seen many drawings from the Japanese culture, showing a space ship carrying a statue. Well, everybody knows it's not true, but having these statues carried by spaceships is a good thing. It's not so crazy, if you've got the spaceship!"