

## The Petroglyph Site at Papa te Kena, Easter Island

Georgia Lee

### INTRODUCTION

The site known as Papa te Kena lies on the northeast coast of Easter Island, northwest of 'Anakena and east of Hanga 'Oteo. This wild and isolated spot on the cliff's edge is far from the inhabited parts of the island (Figure 1). The site features ruins of ancient structures, a large cave (Figure 2), and areas of *papa* (smooth lava flow), some of which contain petroglyphs. There is an extensive tidal pool on the edge of the ocean. Along with various crew members, I worked on this site in 1981, 1982, and 1986 as part of a study of the island's petroglyph sites. Although Mulloy (1965) and William Ayres (1975) also worked at this site they did not note the rock carvings or, if so, failed to mention them. The *papa* is in poor condition making it difficult to see the designs, and it is possible they were simply overlooked.

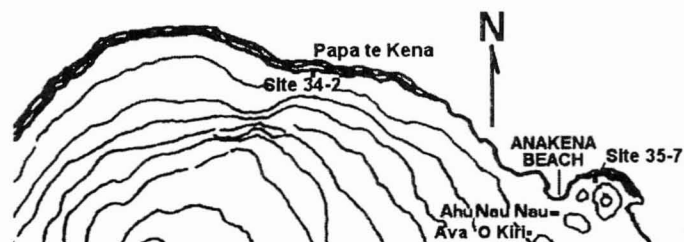


Figure 1. Map of the north end of Easter Island showing the location of Papa te Kena and the cave (Site 34-2).

The *ahu* at this site is listed as #66 in Englert (1983), and is known as either Ahu Marate or Ahu Papa te Kena (Site 34-12). On September 22, 1965, William Mulloy made the following comments about Papa te Kena in his field notebook (Notebook 1, page 60):

This large *ahu* was apparently of type with a central platform and set-back wings. The original central platform façade remains are about 1m high and made partly of vertical slabs and partly of horizontally-laid coursed blocks of selected stones. Several apparent statue parts of Rano Raraku tuff are incorporated in the wall. Ahu is semi pyramidal with tombs built over, adding about 50 cm to center platform height. Center platform and wings are covered with small *pirca* stones. Fragments of at least four and probably more statues lie about, but much eroded. Rectangular platform lies close against the ramp. May have been paved with round stones inside or rubble filled. Walls about 30 cm high and partially constructed of cut *paenga*. Other *paenga* lie about; a flat plaza behind.

In 1973-74, Ayres excavated twenty-six square units inside the nearby cave/lava tube. However, the cave floor was only 15 to 25 cm below the present, thus little or no stratigraphy was preserved. Artifacts recovered included bone needles and cut bone pieces; fishhooks, coral file abraders, *mata'a* and obsidian files. Obsidian comprised 94.7% of the recovered arti-

facts and was dated to around mid-fifteenth century.

Unmentioned in Mulloy's reports are the cave and the petroglyphs. Ayres mentions the cave, of course, but not the petroglyphs. Petroglyphs are located in front of the cave opening, above the cave, running out on the apron of lava that forms the cliff edge, and are also associated with the ruins of the *ahu*. In addition, we found a small site uphill along a trail. The latter is unusual in that the petroglyphs are incised rather than pecked and abraded.

This paper will describe the design motifs at Papa te Kena's four loci and attempt to place them into the corpus of the island's rock art.

### LOCUS A: PETROGLYPHS ON THE *PAPA* THAT RUNS FROM THE CAVE OPENING TO THE CLIFF EDGE

A very long panel extends from the entrance of the cave to the edge of the cliff (Figure 3). Featured are long lines of cupules (387 were counted), a group of short straight lines, bird motifs, a birdman, bird heads, a small face, a *komari*, and a cluster of *moai*-like figures (Figure 4). There are other faint traces also, but these are too indistinct (or perhaps unfinished) to assign to a motif category. Two *polissoir* (depressions resulting from sharpening activity, such as for stone tools) are on the panel. The surface of the rock has extensive patches of lichen and the rock is eroded. The condition of the *papa* is such that the petroglyphs are very difficult to see, even with a raking side-light.

The *moai* figures ("mini-*moai*") are made on naturally segmented lava that itself seems to have suggested the forms. To convert these into figures required only a few lines to indicate a chin or brow line, a nose and depressions for eyes. The largest is 46 cm wide and 148 cm long. All together there are four or five in a cluster (one is so faint that it is indeterminate).

The *kena* represents a masked booby (*sula dactylatra*) and



Figure 2. The cave at Papa te Kena. The cave opening is behind the massive block of lava seen in right foreground. The location of the incised petroglyph site is uphill on a trail and is visible in left upper portion of photograph.

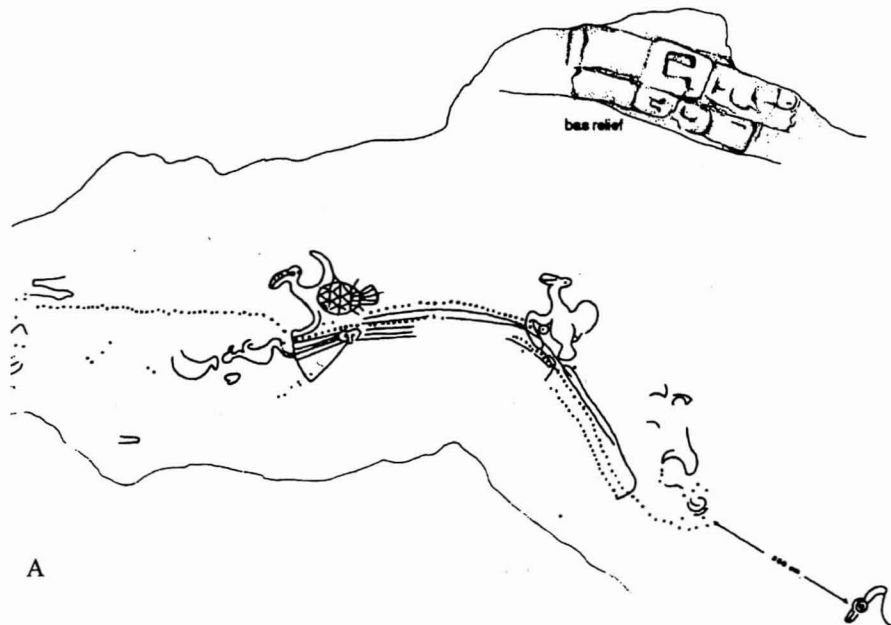


Figure 3. Photo showing the *papa* on which the petroglyphs are carved and the cave area in the background.

one has an interior body design in the form of zigzag lines placed inside a circular "body". Tail feathers and upper wing are clearly shown, as are the eye and beak. Lower curved lines suggest either another wing or the leg/foot. The bird measures 114 x 100 cm. The foot of the bird joins a series of lines and encompasses a row of cupules running along the *papa*. Directly below the bird is a tiny *makemake* face (Makemake was the creator god of the island, pronounced mahkay-mahkay). The line of cupules continues in both directions. On the left (east) it attaches to another less ornamented bird figure (70 x 85 cm) with a beak formed by a natural bulge in the rock.

The panel has curved lines further to the east that are either eroded or incomplete. Still further to the east, a bird head is carved into the rock, showing the beak and head only and some curved attached lines. This likely was the start of another bird. In its present eroded condition, it measures 44 x 89 cm.

Near the central bird figure are an elongated "early" type of birdman, a *komari*, and what may be another start of a bird.



A

Figure 4A: section of the petroglyph panel at Locus A. The birds and other motifs are linked by rows of cupules plus some lines.

The line of cupules continues to another group of partial figures, one with bird overtones. These curved lines encompass two polissoir. After a gap of 145 cm, the lines of cupules continue to the end of the *papa*.

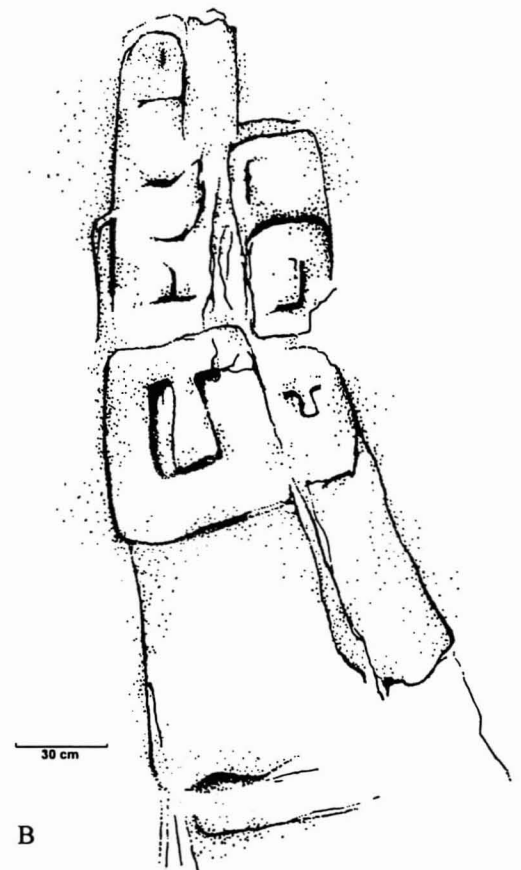
#### LOCUS B: PETROGLYPHS LOCATED ABOVE THE CAVE OPENING ON A HIGHER LEVEL OF *PAPA*

This locus measures 5 x 17 meters and has thirty-five tiny cupules in a row (average 1 cm diameter), two straight lines, one larger cupule of 4.5 cm diameter, a fishhook, five circles, a *makemake* face, two birdman forms, two birds, a fish shape, and four "unidentified" motifs. Isolated cupules are scattered around the area as are 22+ polissoir, and one large, deep *taheta*.

The *makemake* face ("eye-mask") measures 50x70 cm. It is very eroded and sits on the edge of the cliff on a cracked portion of rock, leading to fears that it may break off and fall into the sea (Figure 5).

The fishhook is of typical form found in the rock art of the island; it measures 19 x 31.5 cm.

On the north end of the outcrop are cupules associated with a fish shape, and some other lines that remain unidentified. The fish measures 60x66 cm. A row of oval cupules runs off from the fish, along the edge of the lava.



B

Figure 4B: an enlarged drawing of the mini-moai seen upper right in 4A. The cluster of small moai forms includes either four or five figures.

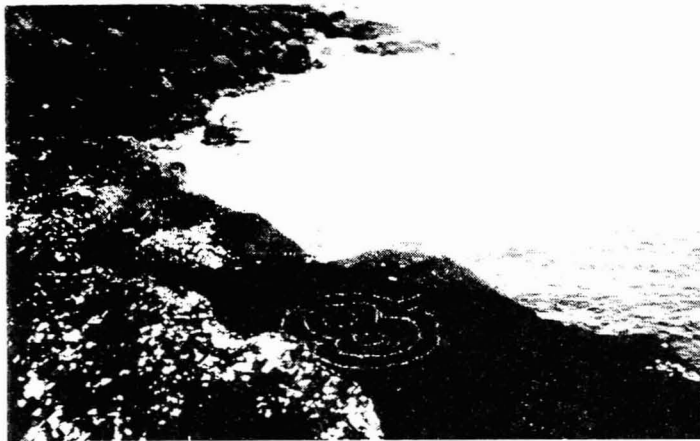


Figure 5. The section of lava, Locus B, above the cave has many petroglyphs including some directly on the cliff edge such as this *makemake* face. Motif was chalked by unknown persons.

#### LOCUS C: PETROGLYPHS ASSOCIATED WITH THE AHU

The petroglyphs are located along the apron of rock and are focused on its outer edge. There is one distinct bird, probably a frigate (*makohe*), one birdman, a small human (*makemake*) face, a possible *komari*, and a large *taheta* with two circles outlining it, an unusual treatment for a *taheta*.

There are at least 86 cupules here, most of which are in a long line that runs through the panel. Four figures made of curving lines are unidentified but one may be an eroded birdman. A tiny human face is on a raised lump of lava at one end of the panel, and it is here that the line of cupules begins (Figure 6).

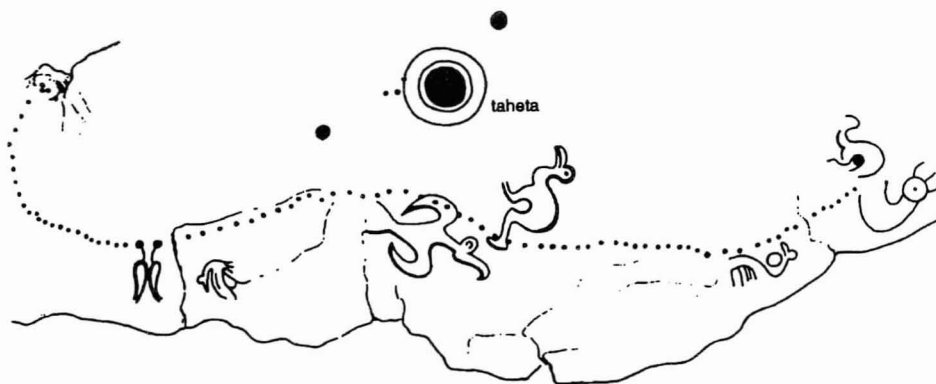


Figure 6. The panel at Locus C; note circles carved around the *taheta*. The line of cupules begins with the small human face on the upper left.

#### LOCUS D: INCISED PETROGLYPHS ON UPPER TRAIL.

This site is located at a *puku* (boulder cluster) of dense basalt near two *pipi horeko* (boundary towers) and directly on the trail. Some of these large boulders contain panels with incised lines and designs. Half of the panels have recognizable designs associated with straight lines; the others contain lines only.

Of the recognizable elements, one has a motif that could be either a palm tree or a fish/tail (Figure 7); one panel has two incised fish, short lines in series, various straight lines, and a small curved element (Figure 8). A fish motif is featured on another

panel; and one panel contains a *komari*.

#### DISCUSSION

**Cupules.** These small pits worked into rock surfaces are ubiquitous on the island. As opposed to cupules in Hawai'i, many of which were involved with the *piko* ceremony, cupules on Easter Island may have served as counting devices. Several informants so described them. Rows of small cupules outline large panels of figures, like a decorative border. At Papa te Kena, they meander through the panel, visually linking the various motifs.

**Circles.** Simple circles were recorded 158 times on the island. Compared to some petroglyph sites on Hawai'i Island, this is a small number. As for distribution, this motif is scattered around the island with a high concentration at the sites associated with Ahu Ra'ai, Ava O Kiri, and Hanga 'Oteo. In Hawai'i, things circular were often considered to be divine, evoking natural patterns such as heavenly bodies (Lee and Stasack 1999:157). What they may have represented on Rapa Nui is not known.

**Komari.** Depictions of female vulvae are the most prevalent motif on Easter Island; 564 of them were documented, 66% of which were found in or near 'Orongo. The sizes range from four cm to one that is a staggering 214 cm long. We have ethnographic information that helps to explain the prevalence of this symbol on the island. Routledge (1919:263) describes the carvings as depicting the vulvae of young women who came to 'Orongo for a special ceremony, possibly as part of the practice of lengthening the clitoris. This practice also has been described for the Society and Austral Islands (Danielsson 1956:74), and the Marquesas (Marshall 1961:199). On Ra'ivavae, the culmination of the stretching of the clitoris was a public display and a ceremony conducted by priests to enhance fertility (ibid.). Sahlins (1985:10,14) however, contends that "sex is the sign of sex" and erotic interests occupied all Polynesians.

**Mini moai.** From a study of the way in which they were carved, it is clear that these are petroglyphs and were not intended to be cut from the rock as, for example, a small "tiki" figure. Mini-moai are made with minimal carving, and often formed over natural humps in the lava, or utilize natural cracks or breaks in the rock. Some have interior lines that suggest arms, and nearly all have some facial features.

Mini-moai constitute an interesting petroglyph form in the

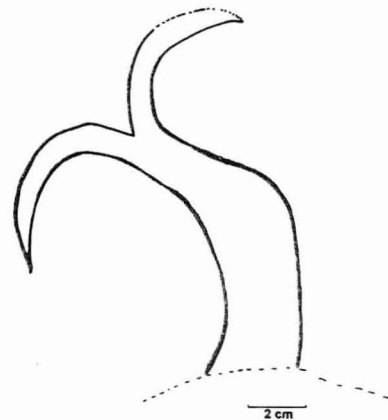


Figure 7. Incised design, perhaps representing a palm or a fish tail, at the upper trail site, Papa te Kena.

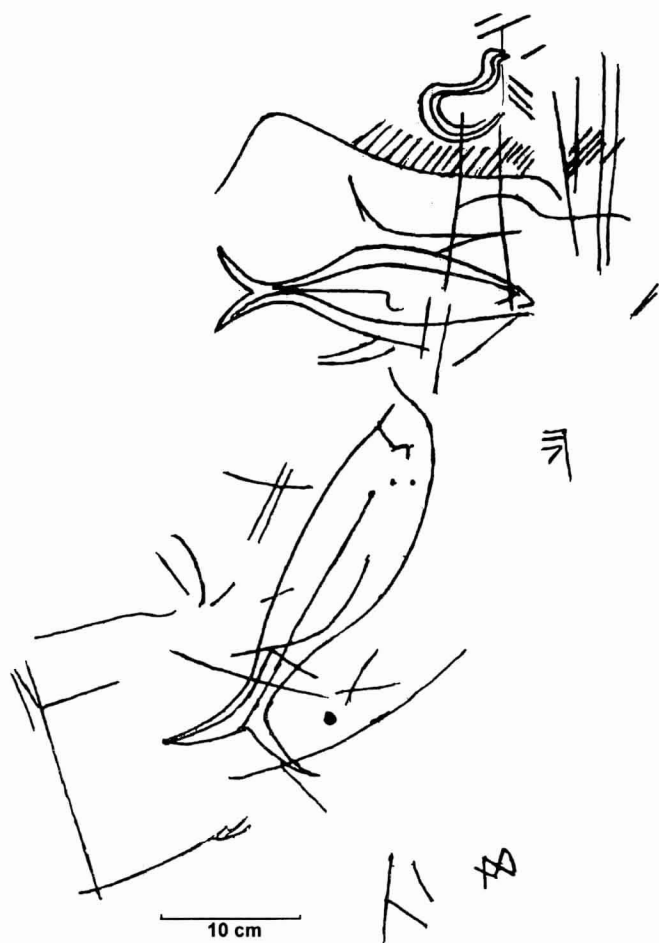


Figure 8. Incised designs at the hillside site, Papa te Kena.

island's rock art. All together 117 examples were documented (Lee 1992:31), many of which are in clusters. It likely that more may be found. They are very subtle and can be easily overlooked. They are fairly evenly spread about the island, except for the Poike peninsula which has none. What they may have signified in the ancient society is unknown.

**Birds.** Bird symbolism is ubiquitous throughout the island. Aside from frigate birds (a motif category distinguished from other bird forms), 103 birds were documented in the island's rock art. Most of these are in the form of terns. The outstanding bird motif at Papa te Kena (Locus A) appears to be a *kena*, further differentiated by the zigzag interior body design. Another *kena* bird is located nearby but it lacks the interior design. The only other similar bird figure in the island's rock art, to my knowledge, is illustrated in a sketch by Lavachery (1939:Fig. 333) showing a bird or birdman at 'Orongo (it is so loosely drawn that the actual form is in doubt) (Figure 9). Lavachery's sketch shows interior lines similar to the one at Papa te Kena. Zigzag lines indicate feathers on some Rapanui woodcarvings. We were unable to relocate this figure at 'Orongo.

One of the Locus C petroglyphs also may represent a frigate bird (*fregata minor*), judging by the raptor-like beak. It is associated with a birdman form.

**Birdman.** These motifs are key designs on the island. The

birdman is composed of a human figure in profile with the head and beak of a bird. At times, a gular pouch (typical of frigate birds) is clearly shown. Most of these are focused in and around 'Orongo, thus it is somewhat unusual to find birdmen at Papa te Kena, so far from the center of the bird cult activities. For all images of birdman, 481 examples were documented, and 86% are located at or near 'Orongo. Three hundred thirty-five of those are in the "Phase 2" style, that is, with crouching figure, rounded back, bent knee and elbow, and gular pouch. The Phase 1 style is more open and less well formed. Neither size nor orientation affect the basic birdman figure. The design remains fixed regardless of these considerations. An example can be seen on Panel A near the foot of the *kena*. Here, a simple Phase 1 birdman lies sideways to the *kena*, the feet touching the lines that connect to the feet of the bird.

**Incised designs:** Comparatively speaking, incised motifs are rare on Easter Island. They are found only on dense basalt boulders where smooth surfaces proved to be attractive. On the usual "papa" lava flow, with its tiny vesicles and other irregularities, incising would not be visible, so those surfaces have pecked and abraded or bas relief figures.

Thus we find incised motifs at those places where the basalt boulders are located. Well-known incised sites are at Hanga Piko, Puku Rangi Atua, and Ava 'O Kiri (Lee 1992:120-122). One of the incised designs at Hanga Piko depicts a tree (Lee 1992: 121) so it is tempting to think a palm tree may be represented at Papa te Kena. However, it could just as easily be the tail of a fish.

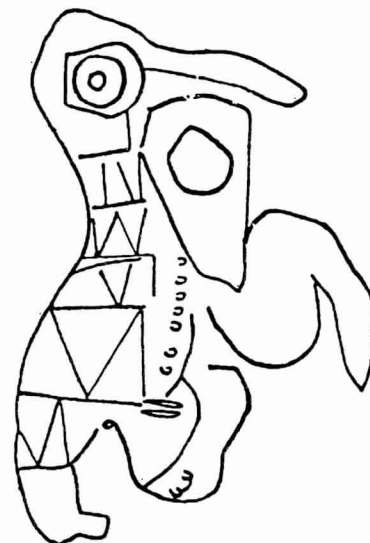


Figure 9. A sketch by Lavachery (1939:Fig. 333) of a birdman with interior design at 'Orongo.

**Fishhook.** This motif is that of a deep sea fishhook, the kind used to catch tuna. It is nearly a circle, often with an out-flung curved element representing the stem. Island-wide, 380 were recorded. Although fishing is/was done all around the island, for some reason, the fishhook design is localized at sites on the north coast. There are no examples found along the south coast of the island, nor are any recorded for 'Orongo. The Easter Island motif of fishhook is virtually identical to those found in the rock art of the Hawaiian Islands (Lee and Stasack 1999).

**Makemake faces:** According to legend, Makemake was the island creator god and the numerous face motifs are said to represent that deity. Faces ranging from full face with all features (and ears!), to the "eye-nose" face, and to the "eye-mask", are present in the rock art of Easter Island. A total of 517 faces was documented around the island (Lee 1992:57). The few examples at Papa te Kena are either eye-nose or eye-mask faces, and two



of these are very tiny and easily overlooked. The large eye-mask face at this site is very prominently carved on the very edge of the cliff.

*Eye-mask faces* have round or oval eyes with one or more lines around them, giving them a mask-like form. It is said that this *makemake* face was the motif of the Miru tribe (the status clan of the island). Eyes were important in Polynesia, and Easter Island was no exception. The word for eye is *mata*, which also can be translated as intelligence, consciousness, or tribe. Eyes of ritually-sacrificed victims in Polynesia often were eaten by priests.

#### CONCLUSION

The site at Papa te Kena has many attributes: an *ahu*, a cave suitable for habitation, a tidal pool, and good fishing. We did not find a legend that is associated with the motifs at this site, but we assume at one time there was one. Perhaps there was a connection between activities at the *ahu* and the petroglyphs. It seems clear that the site takes its name from the *kena* (masked booby) carved on the *papa*. It is of interest to note that the site of 'Anakena also uses the word, "*kena*". Masked boobys rarely are seen on the island today, and likely were driven away by the over-harvesting of eggs and birds.

The extensive petroglyphs at Papa te Kena can all be classified within the general corpus of motifs found on Rapa Nui. Some designs can be found in the wood carving of the island, and they also are reflected in examples of ancient body painting and tattoo. Papa te Kena has birdmen, birds, *komari*, *makemake* faces, fishhooks, cupules, circles, and mini-*moai*. At least four remain unidentified which is fairly typical of the island's sites. Whether or not these were unfinished or eroded is subject to debate.

We lack dates for the petroglyphs but if the dates obtained from the objects excavated by Ayres (1975) are extrapolated, it is likely that the site was occupied from at least the fifteenth century, and probably much earlier. The presence of the birdman image may push that forward, well into the sixteenth century, as the birdman cult rituals were in process after AD 1550, and continued up to historic times.

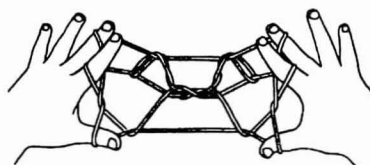
Despite such implications, there is little we can verify without further excavation. We are thus left with enigmatic motifs laboriously carved into the *papa*. Was some ritual conducted here that triggered the image of *makemake*? And what about the *kena*? Was there a legend or did some other significance surround this bird? Were the small *moai* figures intended as "practice" or did they have a separate function from the statues? Could they have been the equivalent of household gods? Might the cupules each refer to an individual who participated in some sacrifice here?

These questions appear to have no firm answers. But we can take pleasure from the elegance of the carvings, and speculate on their meaning. Like so many other small (and large) questions that still remain about the ancient culture, the rationale for much of the island's rock art appears to be lost in time.

#### REFERENCES

- Ayres, William S. (1975). Easter Island. Investigations in Prehistoric Cultural Dynamics. National Science Foundation Grant GS-36732—1973/74. University of South Carolina.
- Danielsson, B. 1956. *Love in the South Seas*. Reynal & Co., New York.
- Englert, Sebastián. 1983 (reprint). *La Tierra de Hotu Matu'a. Historia y Etnología de la Isla de Pascua*. Editorial Universitaria, Chile.
- Lavachery, Henri. 1939. *Les Péroglyphes de l'île de Pâques*. De Sikkel, Anvers.
- Lee, Georgia. 1987. The Cosmic Komari (Further Comment). RAR Debates, *Rock Art Research*, Vol.4(1):51-54.
- Lee, Georgia. 1992. *The Petroglyphs of Easter Island. Symbols of Power, Prayers to the Gods*. Monumenta Arqueologica 17, Institute of Archaeology, UCLA.
- Lee, Georgia and Edward Stasack. 1999. *Spirit of Place. Petroglyphs of Hawai'i*. Easter Island Foundation, Los Osos, California.
- Marshall, Donald. 1961. *Raivavae*. Doubleday and Co., New York.
- Mulloy, William. (n.d.) Original Field Notes of 1965, 1966 Survey of Ahu Orientation around coast. Ms. in collection of author.
- Routledge, Katherine. 1919. *The Mystery of Easter Island*. Hazell, Watson & Viney, London.
- Sahlins, M. 1985. *Islands of History*. University of Chicago Press.

#### INTERNATIONAL STRING FIGURE ASSOCIATION



*E Kuha, E Raii*

On Easter Island string figures are known as *kaikai*. Each year during the *Tapati* festival participants in the *kaikai* contest attempt to weave the

island's traditional designs and recite the ancient chants that accompany them, all with great style and charm.

The International String Figure Association was founded in 1978 to gather and preserve string figures from around the world. Members receive our annual *Bulletin* (200-page book), quarterly magazine, and semi-annual newsletter.

**\$25 annually • Visa/MC accepted**

**International String Figure Association**

**P.O. Box 5134, Pasadena, California 91117 USA**

**[www.isfa.org/~webweavers/isfa.htm](http://www.isfa.org/~webweavers/isfa.htm)**