

## WHO OWNS THE PAST? RAPANUI POINTS OF VIEW

Paul Trachtman

The Mayor of Rapa Nui, Petero Edmunds, sticks his fingers in his ears. "They're like this!" he shows me, describing the Chilean government's refusal to listen. If Chilean officials listened, they would hear the Mayor telling them to stop parceling out Rapa Nui land. "The land is part of our culture," he says. It is to preserve and build upon the culture that he wants Rapanui control of the land to be kept as a park, not broken up into individual homesteads. This is only one point of view on the island, but everyone is talking about the land. As the Mayor puts it, "Yes, even the Council of Elders is fighting among themselves, which is proper to our spirit around the island – there is always some kind of fight. But if you ask any native on the island, what is your objective, what is your point of view about strengthening your position as a native, everyone will agree on the land. No land, no culture. No land, no identity."

My talk with the Mayor took place in August 2001, during two weeks of intensive interviews with many Rapanui artists and cultural leaders, for an article in *Smithsonian* magazine (March 2002 issue). Although my focus was Rapanui art, its traditions and its renaissance, conversations kept drifting inevitably to the subject of the land. On Rapa Nui, overtaxing the land led to the cultural collapse of earlier centuries, and it seems as if the land again holds the key to cultural renewal, or another collapse. Here I will try to capture some of the islanders' voices, as they talk about these issues.

On the way to Rapa Nui, I stop in Santiago to talk with archaeologist Claudio Cristino in his office at the University of Chile. He offers a provocative frame of reference for my visit to the island. As he reflects on his 25 years of work on Rapa Nui, he feels that the future of archaeology on the island is threatened. "Parts of the national park are being fenced, the land is being cleared using bulldozers, or plowed for agriculture. They are destroying archaeological sites!" he says. "Archaeologists are trained not to get involved with people," he goes on ruefully, "but of course you get involved. You get the perception that they don't want you anymore. You are an inconvenient witness. Behind the statues you have people, with their dreams, their needs to develop the island," he says, pointing to the Chilean government's "indigenous law" giving rights to land to local people on the island. "If you ask me, this was a mistake," he says. "This island was not to be touched. If you take the archaeology out, the island is nothing."

In a more philosophical moment, Cristino sees Rapa Nui as a piece of a larger puzzle: "All over the world, people are using the past to recover their identities, their power. The question is, who owns the past? Are we as scientists responsible for nationalism, racism, and all the other political problems? As scientists, can we detach the physical archaeology from the people there now? Do we detach people from their past?"

On the island, artist Cristián Arévalo Pakarati, who has worked with several archaeologists making detailed drawings of the *moai* and grids for restorations, has put in an application for



Mayor Petero Edmunds puts his fingers in his ears, demonstrating the Chilean government's refusal to listen (Photo: Paul Trachtman).

a parcel of land, and dreams of moving his family out of the crowded section of Hanga Roa where they live. "I don't care if I've got a statue in my garden," he says. "That would be nice! That's marvelous. I would take care of that statue with my heart, and I will protect it quite well, because I'm a Rapanui, it's my culture. Anyway, they are my ancestors, you understand? That's the Rapanui point of view".

"The biggest problem," he adds, "is that people think the archaeological artifacts are something separate from ourselves. That's not true. We built them. My great great great grandfather, I don't know how many statues he made. So I think that I've got a little right to have a statue at least!" He laughs.

Such words make some archaeologists cringe. But Rapa Nui archaeologist Sergio Rapu says the land and the monuments should never have been separated from the people, and will be

safe in their hands. "I go to Europe," he says. "I go to the Cathedral at Chartres in the south of France, and I come out of the Cathedral and see houses all over, a few feet away from this huge monument, and I see some remains of Gallo-Roman architecture sticking out of the wall of the house where people are living inside. So that building is participating with the past, and they're hand in hand together. They're not untouchable, They're touchable. They live together. So I think to myself, why can't the Rapanui today touch their monument, handle it, feel it, be part of it?"



Rapanui artist, Cristián Arévalo Pakarati, dreams of having his own bit of land and wouldn't mind having a *moai* in his own garden (Photo: Paul Trachtman).

Like many islanders, Rapu points to the ceremony in 1888, when the Rapanui agreed to be part of Chile: "There was a symbolic act by the king of Rapa Nui, the man who acted as king at that time. Grasping the grass and passing it to the Chilean man, he said, 'This is for you.' And then he grasped the soil and put it into his pocket, saying, 'This is for the Rapanui.' It was a symbol that we do accept the Chilean nationality, we are Chileans, but the right to our property is still ours."

"Right now we have a very important and delicate challenge as the government of Chile begins to return about 10,000 acres of land to the Rapanui people. We're happy that we're getting the land. But we realize there are more than 6,000 archaeological sites on all these lands. What are we going to do with these sites? Many Rapanui people would say, what sites? Because they don't know what sites, they are disconnected. They were reduced from settlements all around the island to one small town, so their way of handling the land was lost. Of course they know the *moai*, the *ahu*, are there. But there are many other landmarks, and there are trails on which the *moai* walked, and we have not yet unraveled the mystery of how they were transported."

"I've suggested to the government of Chile to allocate \$35 million to train people in preserving the monuments, hire teams of archaeologists and students to do salvage archaeology and define with the owners of the land how to make use of those

cultural properties, to their own benefit. If we train people, hundreds of families will be national park guardians for generations and the government won't have to pay for that. And they will take care of that heritage for everybody else, because it's humanity's heritage, it's everybody's heritage."

But Rapu is not waiting for that \$35 million. "On the land today, thanks to archaeology, we have come to appreciate the culture," he says, and he describes how a group of young Rapanui recently took archaeology into their own hands: "They just decided on their own to go and restore some of these remains.

When I heard about that my hair went straight up. But then I went to the government office, to a meeting, and I thought more about it, and I said that in many places in the world, a government would hope that the community get engaged free, voluntarily, in saving their culture. And here we're ready to go send them to jail because they're damaging archaeology! I mean, what more damage has been done by the sheep and horses of the British company, and the government bulldozers today. So we cooled down, and turned around 180 degrees in our attitude, and we went to the field where these kids were doing the work."

"First thing I saw was that many of the remains they were restoring, were ready to disappear. A chicken house almost down to the ground, a circle of stones called a *manavai*, and a landmark where the stones were removed a hundred years ago to make a fence. So these Rapanui young people, who went there on their own and started rebuilding these things, are to be prized. So I went there and became their volunteer, and we worked together."

Rapu points out that archaeologists have brought students from universities in other countries to get experience in restorations and work on *ahu*. "Well," he says, "Rapanui students have the moral right to be engaged before anybody else. And that's why we're inviting them, through the museum, through the high school, to participate. Not only excavating, but working physically to have some experience in construction, to understand how stones fit together, to see what goes in front of the *ahu* or the back, and so on. So the experience of children with the *ahu*, from an early age, is to the benefit of preserving our culture in the future. And in that process, not only the archaeologists will be the ones to speak, and explain, but the public as well."

The youngsters who set out to restore island artifacts were answering Claudio Cristino's question, "Who owns the past?" In raising a chicken house from its ruins, they set in motion a powerful metaphor for raising Rapanui consciousness. Andreas "Panda" Pakarati, who revived the art of the Rapanui tattoo, saw their gesture as a symbol of the impoverishment of his culture, as well as a sign of progress. "Those kids who went to rebuild the chicken houses themselves," he points out, "had to go on television and beg for money from the people, and live on bananas."

"The archaeology on this island should be for the benefit of

the Rapanui people, not just for the archaeologists from other countries." he says. "The archaeologists just see the *moai*, but the *moai* didn't make themselves. The people made them. The people made the culture, and the situation of the people on the island now is the real problem. Some tourists think that nobody lives here when they come here. But they return to their country with the people in their heart, not with the *moai* in their heart."

For René Edmunds, a Rapanui guide who is building a residencia, the reconstruction of the chicken house by young people is an act of redemption. "It's very important," he says, "it's a very heavy message for the island's children. I'd never seen anything like that with my parents, or grandparents. It's a new thing. It's good, because they feel they need to take up the culture, reconstruct it, teach the children about it."

"My grandfather told me, before he died, that his generation didn't care about the culture because they were very poor, and the principle thing was to survive. They lost many things, and they didn't know many things. They didn't care about things like the *moai*, the ancient art. They gave it to other people, to strangers, because they didn't think it was a very important thing for your son, or your grandson. Now it's different. Our culture now is our life. It's our work. It's everything. It's our mission."

Among the Rapanui, renewal of their culture and return of their land are strands of one story, like fibers pounded into one sheet of tapa. But different voices tell the story in very different ways. At the Hotel Orongo one evening, a group gathers to tell



From the sketchbook of Paul Trachtman.

me about their map, and their plans for a new Rapanui Parliament. They have no use for the Chilean government, or for the island's own Council of Elders. Behind their words lies the wreckage of two houses raised on National Park land without government approval, and thrown down by a government bulldozer, but their political agenda is stirring support among some Rapanui. Juan Chavez (Teave), who owns the hotel, and Benedicto Tuki, one of the island's eldest wood carvers, show me the large map, dividing the island along traditional tribal boundaries. "This map was made by us and all the older generation," says Juan Chavez. "We went by horseback across the island for over a month, trying to find all the landmarks, all the evidence of how the island was divided in earlier times by the tribes. When a Parliament is elected, the leaders will use this map to decide how to distribute the land to the native people." For Chavez' son Hugo, the map represents the end of professional archaeology. "Since Mulloy, it's been like a mafia of archaeologists. Now I hope no archaeologists come to the island," he declares. His sister Inés agrees. "All that they call archaeology is not archaeology for us," she says. "It's a system of life. They cannot come and say that we can't live here. The land is no problem. The land will always be here. But we have to change our system of living. That is the problem. Now we will have our Parliament, and we are writing our own laws." What does the government think of this? I ask her. "I don't know," she says. "We haven't asked. We don't need to ask."

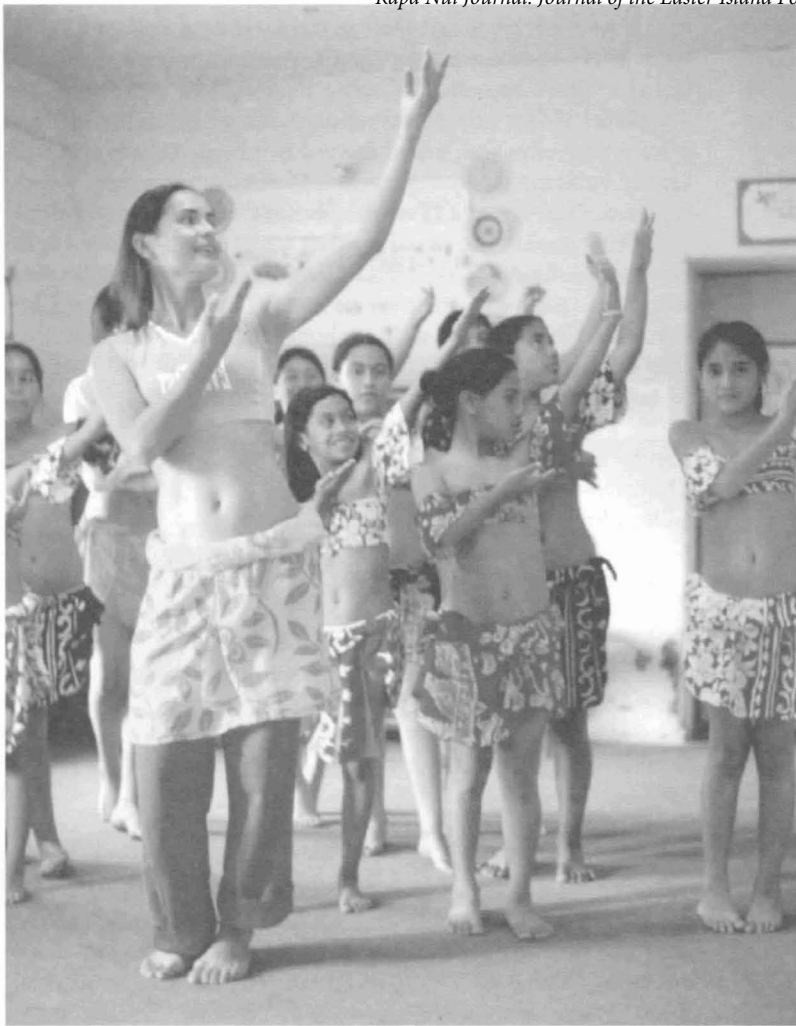
The next evening, a larger group of Rapanui gather in the darkening courtyard of a nearby house to talk about the Parliament. The discussion is heated, much of it focused on the Chileans until one woman protests: "We are the problem because we are fighting among ourselves," she says. "I don't see any Chileans here!" Some people want all Chileans to leave Rapa Nui, want to tell them "Give me back my island." A daughter of Benedicto Tuki speaks up. "Look, I have a Chilean husband," she says. "Why do you say he has to go? I will say to my husband, if you stay with me here, I have to be the boss to protect you. I am Rapanui, so you can stay here and help me take care of the children." Another woman raises her voice. "We don't want your husband to go, it's only an argument to say Chileans leave here. Not your husband. If he's married to a Rapanui, fine. No problem."

As I write this, the "Parliament" has recently appeared in public and begun to hold weekly sessions, with a lot of criticism that they do not represent anybody, but are a private group. Juan Chavez and Inés stick to their guns that they are the wave of the future.

The Rapanui have many different visions of the future and just as many different perceptions of the present. Perhaps the greatest difference is over the cultural renaissance on the island now – whether it is rooted in tradition or being reinvented. (I'll explore various Rapanui views about this in the next issue of RNJ). But the work of young artists on the island, from the carvers, tattooists and painters to the performing musicians and dancers, represents a cultural force that is creating its own future.

In this at least, the old and the young are in accord. Papa Kiko Pate, the island's oldest singer, avows that the island's oral tradition is intact, in its songs, and he is the living voice of





Carolina Edwards, one of Rapa Nui's most talented dancers, teaches dance classes at the youth centre in Hanga Roa (Photo: Paul Trachtman).

says. "We never stop. We practice all the time, and we have shows twice a week, and we're all helping to build a new cultural center for the group." The dances tell Rapanui stories, set to music and movement that reflects many other Polynesian influences. Carolina has danced with Hawaiian groups, and with Kari Kari she has performed in Samoa, New Zealand and New York. Others in the 24 member company have danced at festivals in Australia, Spain, Tahiti and Korea.

While Rapa Nui tourism supports the company, all the dancers have to work at other jobs. "I dance because I love to dance," Carolina says. "If I thought of dance as my only work," she laughs, "no way, it's not going to work. Most of the dancers are students and also have two or three other jobs. I teach dance at the Youth Center, and I work for my dad's tourist agency. To me, it's so boring to work for the government over here. I don't want to sit at a desk all day in an office or in the schools. And the only way you can make good money is tourism." Carolina also starts her day before dawn, heading down to the *caleta* for paddle practice with a group of Rapanui women, reviving another cultural skill as they train to compete in Polynesian canoe races. After only three months of practice, the women went to the world canoe championships in Bora Bora where they represented Rapa Nui against 20 countries and made it to the finals, finishing in eighth place.

Most island artists welcome tourism as the only source of support for their work, and see tourists as a resource, not as a threat to their culture and their future. Tattooist Panda Pakarati points out that some wood carvers don't bother to develop their skills because some tourists will buy anything they make. But he doesn't blame the tourists. "Today, to try to live in the old traditions is really a personal decision," he says, "because nobody gives you any medals for it. The problem of the culture does not come from the tourists, it comes from

us."

that tradition. "The songs were not changed," he says. "They are always conserved, so that they won't get lost. That's the way people were. But I think that now, because there are so many singers, that things are changing. Now people also invent new songs."

Jimmy Araki, a young musician in the Kari Kari dance group, is an example: "As a musician, I use legends, tales that were written down earlier, oral tradition. My grandma would tell me a story and I'd make a song with the words, and make up new music." He sees the culture as both threatened and flowering. "A lot of kids aren't speaking their native language anymore," he says. "Kari Kari is trying to bring kids into the group to learn, to keep their culture and their language. We try to encourage them to learn how to play instruments, we try to give them knowledge. And it's been working. If there's a party and someone puts on the group's music, they'll start dancing, and they know how to dance, they know the whole song, they know what it means. So it is working. Along with disco music, they are learning the Rapanui music."

A Kari Kari dancer, Carolina Edwards, embodies the island's new cultural energy. "We are dancing all the time," she

us."

Anthropologist Grant McCall, working on the island when I was there, adds an historical footnote to Panda's point. "The Rapanui see their history with the West in terms of the tourist trade from the start," he says. "That's how they've explained it to me." After the first ships came to the island, the Rapanui figured out what the visitors wanted, and by the time Captain Cook showed up, they were ready. "Cook got piles of stuff. La Pérouse got more junk," he says. "And some of it's not very nice. Some of those 'ancient household gods' – you can get better stuff today. When things got rolling in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, they couldn't whack the stuff out fast enough. You couldn't give some of that stuff away on the island today!"

On the island today Rapanui culture, like the population, has rebounded from its nadir a century ago, but the land remains to be reclaimed. "The government didn't want to give back the land for more than a hundred years," says Cristián Arévalo Pakarati. "We have been fighting with them for a hundred years. Now, the government has started giving back land, and everybody's fighting each other to get some piece of land." Without the land, he points out, the culture is cut off

from the roots that once nurtured it, and must depend for its survival on tourism and promotion. "I'm not saying that the culture is disappearing," he says. "I'm just saying that the culture nowadays has been managed so much that it doesn't seem like a culture anymore. It seems more like a business."

Petero Edmunds, the Mayor, wants the land back, but he is against giving it back to individuals as the Chilean government is starting to do. "That's why my friends are calling me Don Quixote, with my imaginary sword, trying to fight the un-fightable," he says. "That's my fight. It's always been our position to recuperate our right to the our land, to make our culture stronger. It's the only way. But this doesn't mean cutting up the land into your piece, my piece, and we can do whatever we want."



A Rapa Nui scene from the sketchbook of Paul Trachtman.

"I understand that we're growing, having children," he says. "And we've got to think about development, how we are going to develop ourselves within our heritage. I think we're smart enough to do that, without putting this island in jeopardy. If capitalism could come to Rapa Nui, it would build Hilton hotels and Holiday Inns to make tourists more comfortable, with facilities around the beautiful *moai* and *ahu*. I'm against that. And I'm against the type of mentality, including our own, that says I want a house in front of Rano Raraku to have a beautiful view. That's absurd. In my opinion, we're already in Hanga Roa, we've already ruined this area, let's stay here, and keep the rest of the island as untouched as possible."

The Mayor wants the entire island returned to the Rapanui, entrusted to the Council of Elders, which would create an executive entity to look after the roads, maintenance and tourism. And he has plans for a new high school complex, and after that a university on the island. "My dream is that in 20 years we can turn the island into a great village for knowledge," he says. "The idea is to put together a group of universities around the Pacific, so they can send their students to study here on Rapa Nui, and we can educate our children here, not 4,000 miles

away. This is the exact spot to do this. The basis of the *moai* is knowledge. This is what our ancestors taught us. Knowledge is power. Power is knowledge."

As we talk, the Mayor shows me the collection of Polynesian art that hangs on his office walls. There are original paddles and amulets from other islands. The Rapanui art is either contemporary or replicas of traditional objects taken from the island. As we talk, the first U.S. exhibition of Rapanui art is being prepared at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The show presents Rapanui culture in terms of the island's traditional archaeology and art (no contemporary artists were invited to participate).

"It shouldn't be looked at that way," the Mayor says. "I mean, we're not dead! We're alive! And it's important that the exposure of our culture lets the world know that we are alive, that the *moai* are not silent. The *moai* speak!" As he says this, I think of Claudio Cristino's question, "Who owns the past?" When I ask the Mayor, he answers without batting an eye: "The world. Since this culture is based on spirits, who knows that my ancestor who once lived here and built a *moai*, is not reincarnated in President Bush! The spirits travel. This belongs to the world. As for the island, we should give it to their descendants as the trustees of these world entities."

Hearing the Mayor's words, I recall how Claudio Cristino had answered his own question, after 25 years on Rapa Nui: "As a scientist, with all my deficiencies, I've spent half my life there. It's *my* island!"

A few days later, before leaving the navel of the world, I ask the dancer Carolina to show me her favorite place on the island. She takes me over a dirt track that leads down to the coast, where her boyfriend likes to go surfing and spear fishing. I ask if she ever thinks of leaving the island, but the world has not tempted her. "I used to think I'd like to go off the island and have a profession," she says. "But this is the best life for me. People are very happy with what they have here, because they know what they have. That's why, when tourists come from different countries, we're saying, like, "Ha! See my island. This is *my* island!"

*Paul Trachtman is a former science editor for Smithsonian magazine, author, and artist. This is the first of two articles which resulted from his recent visit to Rapa Nui.*