Te Pito o Te Henua (The Navel of the World) or Prodigous Slageap? The Rapanui struggle for land and sovereignty.

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Rapa Nui1 has much that makes it mysterious and alluring to the modern tourist, scholar, and non-Rapanui inhabitant. Its nearest inhabited neighbors are Chile, 2,300 miles to the east and the British-controlled Pitcairn Islands over 1,000 miles to the west, making it one of the most remote places ever to be settled on earth. Tales of Rapa Nui and its huge quarried stone statues (or Moai), gathered from short visits and speculation, spread back to Europe and the Americas igniting the imaginations of travelers and other explorers. Euro-American interests in Rapa Nui culminated in the annexation of the island by Chile in 1888. However, Chile was a second-rate colonial power and allowed Rapa Nui to languish as a colonized backwater totally owned by a singular private company who corralled the significantly reduced population into a small area of the island, removing them from their traditional lands and lifestyle. Conditions similar to this continued to persist even after Chile took direct control over the island in 1935; the exploitation of Rapanui land and people for ranching eventually transformed into the exploitation of Rapanui land and people for tourism, although much of the tourist industry is now undertaken by the Rapanui themselves.

In the time since contact with Western powers broke their 1,300 year isolation from the world, the Rapanui indigenous and communal concepts of land ownership and sovereignty have come under attack as the Rapanui, who are now officially Chilean citizens, both adapt to and resist the Chilean model of individual ownership and a changing economic structure based on tourism and a cash economy.

To understand the changes that occurred because of contact with Euro-Americans a brief overview of pre-contact Rapa Nui is needed, although this is hampered by the lack of written records and oral histories due to limited contact before the 1860s as well as the extreme depopulation of the nineteenth century. While there are several theories concerning the settlement of Rapa Nui, the most accepted and supported is that Polynesian mariners came from the Marquesas anywhere between the fourth and eleventh centuries C.E.2 Rapa Nui is a sub-tropical environment with little rainfall (about one meter per year), and certain crops familiar to Polynesians (taro, breadfruit) and other materials (coral) were unavailable to the settlers.3 While Rapa Nui was forested with indigenous eucalyptus, the primary material available to the settlers was stone; this was used for houses, weapons, and ceremonial artifacts (such as the famed Moai).4

Though considered poor and backward by many visiting explorers, the Rapanui were actually productive users of the land and
established a symbiotic relationship with each other and with a communal land tenure system.\textsuperscript{5} According to Rapanui oral history, upon landing the people divided themselves into two groups, each composed of clans and “other small groups who were related.”\textsuperscript{6} These groups were divided into classes, with a head chief, priests, and clans composed of a number of ivi, or households. Each ivi could trace its descent to a common ancestor, was composed of about thirty people, and was headed by the senior male.\textsuperscript{7} Each clan was given henua poreko ranga (the land where the ancestors were born) and this was divided among the ivi.\textsuperscript{8} According to an early anthropologist on the island working for the Bishop Museum, “All the people were supposed to have about the same amount of land to cultivate…each estate was probably a straight strip of land (kaingu) which stretched from the shore to the interior of the land.”\textsuperscript{9} Scholars differ on the inheritance patterns of pre-contact Rapanui. Patrick McCoy states that “property was inherited by children from both the father and mother”\textsuperscript{10} while Grant McCall claims that the first born, or “shadow of the king,” inherits his father’s land and possessions and that younger brothers must go elsewhere to found families.\textsuperscript{11}

On a larger scale the Rapanui divided their island by bisecting it from the east to the west, ending at the ceremonial village of Orongo. To the north lived the Tu’uavo clan group, who possessed marginal soil for agriculture but better access to sea resources; to the south lived the Hotuiti who possessed good agricultural land. Other smaller groups controlled access to other trade products such as ochre and obsidian. These smaller groups lived within Tu’uavo or Hotuiti territory and aligned themselves with the respective group. Both the Tu’uavo and Hotuiti were marriage partners with each other: “a man’s wife was his opponent’s sister, and his sister kept house for his enemy.”\textsuperscript{12} The pre-contact Rapanui had developed a land tenure system that was both matrilineal and patrilineal, and forced cooperation on a large scale (although warfare existed, it was not internecine) through the symbiotic relationship between ‘sister marriage’ and the balance between the Tu’uavo and Hotuiti clans.\textsuperscript{13}

This symbiotic relationship changed drastically after contact with Europeans. Rapa Nui was first sighted by three Dutch ships on Easter Day, 1722.\textsuperscript{14} More Europeans came to Rapa Nui intermittently – the Spanish in 1770\textsuperscript{15}, the English Captain Cook in 1774, and the French La Pérouse in 1786. These early contacts are important for many reasons: the Rapanui worldview was now forever altered with the arrival of a distinctively different race of people, European trade goods such as iron and cloth were introduced into a Stone Age system, and the outside world now knew of their existence from the journals of these early explorers. J. Douglas Porteous compares these journals to a “time bomb set to explode years later when traders, missionaries, and planters, their appetites whetted, began to flow into the new frontier.”\textsuperscript{16}

Most of the European expeditions did not stay long, averaging a few days to a week, for several reasons. The Europeans, for the most part, did not hold a high opinion of the land. In his journal Captain James Cook stated “[w]e saw not an animal of any sort, and but few birds; nor indeed anything which can induce ships that are not in the utmost distress to touch at this island.”\textsuperscript{17} Joseph Gilbert, on the same expedition, wrote that “the land is exceedingly poor, the hills full of stones, of a hungry dry soil incapable of cultivation.”\textsuperscript{18} European explorers noted the eagerness of the Rapanui to trade, but were offended by the propensity of the Rapanui to try and steal any trade goods they could. Many scholars point to the fact that the Rapanui had a communal sense of property and were not aware of the notions of private property that the Europeans held.\textsuperscript{19}

Trade with the European explorers had a huge effect on Rapanui society. The symbiotic relationship between the Tu’uavo and Hotuiti changed as the Europeans, who favored deep water anchorages for their larger
boats, traded with the Hotuiti because their shoreline was better suited to European needs than the “shallow, sloping shore with rocks and reefs” favored by the Tu’uavo for their smaller craft.20 The Hotuiti, who controlled all the access to these new and sought after goods, were able to tip the balance of trade and amass more power than the Tu’uavo. Porteous, summarizing Cook’s Pacific journals, states that “the introduction of new wants among people formerly oblivious of the dubious blessings of European technology was often sufficient to permanently disrupt existing social and environmental equilibria.”21 For the Rapanui, as with many other Pacific Island peoples, first contacts with the Europeans brought new goods and ideas which were a catalyst for the erosion of indigenous trade relationships and concepts of land usage. Cook was right: the introduction of European goods, mainly weapons or metal to be forged into weapons, into Rapanui society caused internecine warfare as the various clan groups fought and clamored for control of the island. One thing that escaped his analysis was the disruptive effects of European diseases that spread to the Rapanui population, causing a marked decline. However, conditions for the Rapanui showed signs of improvement by the middle of the nineteenth century. The population decline had stabilized, the European visits were fewer and better managed, and the warfare which plagued the island during the early part of the century had subsided and ceremonial activities at the court of Anakena on the eastern part of the island were revived.22 However, the Rapanui were not completely isolated from the emerging imperialism in the Pacific. Taking a cue from other nations engaging in slaving activity in the Pacific in the early 1860s, Peru began to conduct slaving raids on Rapa Nui to capture people for work on Peruvian plantations and mines – in clear violation of any indigenous rights or sovereignty. It is hard to know exactly how many Rapanui were forced onto Peruvian ships but the number is put close to 1,000.23 Exposed to new diseases and challenging environmental conditions, about ninety percent of the Rapanui who were taken died within two years in Peru. The English and French governments, although they were engaging in similar activities in the Pacific, pressured the Peruvians to cease their slaving raids and repatriate the Rapanui.24 The Peruvians, apparently believing that one island is as good as another, deposited the remaining Rapanui on Tahiti and left them to find their way back to Rapa Nui. In total about two percent of those taken by the Peruvians arrived back to their homeland, and they carried with them infectious diseases which took a huge toll on the population.25

During this time the first Christian missionaries, from Chile and Tahiti, began to arrive on the island along with a few private entrepreneurs looking to establish some sort of plantation economy. The missionaries established the first western buildings on Rapa Nui: a church, a one-room schoolhouse, and several western style houses were constructed. Conversions were sporadic at first, but a small number of converts settled near the Mission in present day Hangaroa. At around the same time a French captain, Jean-Baptiste Dutrou-Bornier, landed on the island and began purchasing land from the Rapanui to start a ranching operation. Backed by Scottish and French financial supporters in Tahiti, Dutrou-Bornier began building allies with European trade goods and established himself as a pseudo-monarch, setting up a “council of state” to oversee land sales.26 Dutrou-Bornier became frustrated with the difficulty in attempting to purchase land from the Rapanui, who still held a communal view of land wherein the entire family owned the land and receive title according to “hereditary, compulsory, or voluntary occupation.”27 Hippolyte Rousell, writing a few decades after the initial land sales, states “If you intend to buy land, you have...to buy the lands from all the individuals on the place in order not to cheat anybody.”28

Allying with Torometi, a Tu’uavo chief, Bornier supplied the Tu’uavo with
western weapons helping the French-Rapanui force overwhelm the unarmed Hotuiti and Missionary allied force.²⁹ Now in control of most of the island, Dutrou-Bornier forcibly deported several hundred Rapanui to plantations on Tahiti and the Gambier archipelago.³⁰ Dutrou-Bornier underwent a spate of land purchases; most of the sellers were coerced with alcohol, intimidation, or violence, and many of the purchases had no witnesses, measurements, boundaries, or plans.³¹ The ranching company was now free to pursue its operations on Rapa Nui with minimal outside interference or indigenous resistance and began importing sheep in 1871.

Within a decade, the population of Rapa Nui fell from around two thousand to little more than two hundred, and went from practicing a traditional lifestyle on their traditional land to that of subsistence farming on small plots confined within Hangaroa. The main financial backer of Dutrou-Bornier, the Scottish Brander family, formally incorporated the relationship into the Brander-Bornier company. This company now controlled the entirety of Rapa Nui until the end of private ownership in the island in 1953, some seventy years into Chilean annexation. The effect of sheep ranching on the environment and people cannot be understated. Strong parallels can be drawn between the effects of large-scale ranching in Scotland and in Rapa Nui.

Differences in indigenous peoples and culture aside, both Scotland and Rapa Nui were semi-arid landscapes mostly covered in grassland. What remained of the indigenous trees in Rapa Nui was destroyed by the sheep, which ate the protective bark off of the trees and devoured the saplings. The Brander-Bornier company, and their successor, Easter Island Exploitation Company (CEDIP), attempted to solve this problem by introducing eucalyptus trees from Australia that shed their bark, and while successful, the wood was inferior and the Rapanui were unable to work it into traditional tools and art. Fences were constructed to keep both the sheep and Rapanui within a confined area, and to limit poaching by the Rapanui. Forced onto smaller and more marginal land, the Rapanui could no longer grow everything they needed to sustain themselves and had to rely on the seasonal work offered by the company. This forced introduction into a cash economy was made more exploitative by the fact that the only place to spend the cash earned was at the company store. Detailing the effects of ranching on subsistence societies like Scotland, Porteous writes that it involves “enclosures, population clearances, deserted villages, and the forced migration and proletarization of many peasants;”³² replacing “peasants” with “Rapanui” describes perfectly the situation in Rapa Nui.

The late nineteenth century is known to history as a high point in European imperialism. Large swaths of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific were conquered and divided up amongst the European powers. Chile, having just won the War of the Pacific against Peru and Bolivia, was looking to establish a South American imperial empire. With Valparaiso a major stop in trans-Pacific shipping, Chile annexed Rapa Nui in 1888 believing that it could be a very profitable refueling and resupply station. Chile questioned the legality of the annexation, citing that Rapa Nui was effectively terra nullius because the Bornier-Brander company (which at this time was involved in a complicated restructuring after the death of both Dutrou-Bornier and Brander) was not representative of any government, but rather they were operating on a tabula rasa, or “blank slate.”³³ Although the English, Spanish, and French could have claimed sovereignty over Rapa Nui, none chose to, most likely due to the marginal economical potential of the island compared to other Pacific islands. The claims of the Rapanui people for sovereignty were of course the strongest, but also the easiest to dismiss by all the other nations concerned with the issue.³⁴ The Rapanui were prevented from claiming both land and sovereignty by their small numbers and the existence
of a private security force employed by the company. The treaty of annexation was written in both Spanish and the Rapanui dialect (a mixture of Tahitian and what remained of the Rapanui language), and the two versions differed markedly. The Chilean version stated that the chiefs ceded the sovereignty over the island in favor of the Republic of Chile; in the Rapanui version Chile offered to be a “friend to the land.” As to the question of title to the land, legal scholar Maria Pereyra-Uhrle writes:

Neither version mentioned cession of property title. On the contrary, the oral tradition of Rapanui people records that Atamu Tekena, the ariki, grabbed a portion of land with grass in his hand, gave the grass to Policarpo and kept the land. This gesture meant that although sovereignty may have been ceded, Rapanui people retained their inalienable property rights over the land of their island.

However, it is obvious by the continued violation of Rapanui rights that neither the Chileans nor the ranching companies saw it this way.

Chile, claiming sovereignty but possessing no title, underwent negotiations with the heirs to the Brander-Bornier company for purchase of the island. Chile was able to acquire only about 2,000 acres (out of 16,000) through purchase because the owners of the majority of the shares were undergoing litigation in a French court. The ownership of the remaining acreage was settled after another Scottish ranching family bought the shares of the company and re-named it the Easter Island Exploitation Company (CEDIP) in 1892. The CEDIP was a branch of Williamson, Balfour and Company, which was described by its own historian as an “empire” that had offices in six continents. During this time Chile attempted twice to settle the island as an agricultural colony; both were miserable failures that resulted in total abandonment of the agricultural model. At this point in 1892 Chile was facing internal problems and public opinion was against sending more resources to Rapa Nui. In 1896 Chile instead chose to lease its 2,000 acres to CEDIP under a twenty year lease which stipulated that the company would fund a yearly supply ship and keep fuel and provisions for any Chilean ships that called upon the island. Rapa Nui now effectively became a Chilean colony in name only; in reality the Chilean state was not interested in developing Rapa Nui as a colony, rather it chose to let the CEDIP run the colony as a company state. Complete CEDIP control of Rapa Nui continued until 1917 at which point Chile placed Rapa Nui under Naval authority and law, although the lease to the company was extended for another fifteen years. This was justified legally by the Chileans by a res nullius decision, that the territory was ‘nobody’s property’ and as such could be reassigned at will, thereby ignoring the wishes of both the CEDIP and the Rapanui. The impetus for this decision was the constant complaints by visiting church personnel and influential Chilean citizens to the government about company treatment of the Rapanui. The CEDIP was accused of “depriving the Rapanui of their land…giving almost of the scarce sweet water supply to their stock, and of driving the inhabitants from the coasts into the mountainous interior where the land was less fertile,” requiring company permission to leave Hangaroa, and sustaining inflated prices at the company store. While these accusations ring true, modern historians have laid much of the blame on Chile for allowing the complete monopoly of the CEDIP to exist without any government oversight. The Chilean government and CEDIP ignored the Rapanui demands for autonomy when asked: “…who gave the earth Merlet (the head CEDIP official on Rapa Nui) because it is a big robbery. They took this possession of ours, and they give nothing for the earth, money or goods or anything else…” The Chilean government again took a paternalistic attitude towards the Rapanui people, denying their connection to, and original ownership of, the land. Chile again renewed the CEDIP contract in 1933,
In January 1935 Chile declared the entire island to be a National Park "in order to protect natural and archaeological resources," seemingly classifying the Rapanui as a natural or archaeological resource or artifact waiting for the right time to be exploited.

Although Rapa Nui was now under naval authority, little changed in the everyday lives of the Rapanui until the CEDIP lease was revoked in 1953. Conflict between the Rapanui and Chile with the CEDIP continued, several revolts were put down, and their leaders sent to exile in Chile. Effectively the Rapanui were prisoners in both the town of Hangaroa and on the island of Rapa Nui. There was little that the Chilean civilian or naval officials who lived on Rapa Nui could do for the Rapanui—the CEDIP controlled the annual vessel, all employment, and the island's food supply, which effectively placed everyone in a position of company dependency.41

By the early 1950's Chile was taking a much larger interest in Rapa Nui as a base for international flights, and increasing scientific interest coupled with a broader decolonization movement pushed Chile to cancel the contract with the CEDIP and bring Rapa Nui fully under the control of the Valparaiso district. Conditions started to improve for the Rapanui, although the first real change was made from within. A generation of Rapanui children educated in mainland Chile, and other Rapanui who volunteered for naval service brought back with them new ideas that challenged the established naval order and sparked a revolution for self-government. Perhaps this new influx of ideas can be compared to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in that it is human nature to want education and betterment, to leave the cave to find knowledge and enlightenment, and the duty of an enlightened soul is to come back into the cave (Rapa Nui) and attempt to enlighten those still left in the dark. The first step of this move for self-governance was the election of an indigenous Rapanui schoolteacher as mayor in 1965. In 1966, the Chilean government passed Law 16441, better known as the Easter Island Law, which created the Municipal Government of Easter Island Provence; this law set up public service offices such as a court, a police office, a bank, and recognized the right of Rapanui people to vote as well as claim Chilean citizenship.42 While this was a major step forward for the rights of Rapanui people, they were now placed firmly within the Chilean state and received no compensation for the loss of their land.

The current state of land tenure in Rapa Nui is simple according to law, yet complicated in its application. In 1972, during the military takeover of Chile, the military junta replaced the civilian government with a military governor and placed Sergio Rapa Huoa, an indigenous Rapa Nui, in the position. For the first time a Rapanui person was effectively in charge of the island since annexation. The major change for the Rapanui came with the passage of Decree-Law 2885 in 1987 which “provided for the donation of land and the transfer of title over such lands to their 'regular occupants' (meaning persons born in and currently residing in Rapa Nui) and recognised the exclusive property right over land of Easter Island in native people.”43

The Indigenous Law of 1993 enacted by the civilian government reaffirmed the Rapanui rights over their traditional lands and set up barriers to the sale of indigenous land. These laws set up commissions made up of ethnic Rapanui that helped facilitate the transfer of land if the application was approved by the court, leaving room for the court to deny applications if the land was currently in use by the Chilean state.

Rapanui concepts of land ownership have necessarily changed since pre-contact. After forced movement to Hangaroa, the Rapanui from the entire island chose to emphasize their ties with the members of their extended family that possessed claim to those lands.44 Each plot of land claimed
by a Rapanui is held in common by their taina, a literal or figurative kinship group that can consist of family or close friends. For a modern Rapanui to claim land on which to build a house and farm a garden plot they must appease the wishes of the taina; those supportive of their taina will find access to land, and those that ignore the taina will find themselves without land to build a home on. This reinforces the communal nature of Rapanui life, for “land is the material basis for determining kinship” and a house and land are “tangible symbols of success for the Rapanui,” and a symbol that they are an accepted member of their taina.45 Grant McCall sums up the importance of land to the Rapanui:

Land is the most crucial productive instrument that the Rapanui have… from the land people derive their food, a place for their residence, an inheritance to pass on to their children, and literally a place in the community.46

The Rapanui do face strong pressure to abandon this system of communal ownership that is so contrary to western views of land. Since the 1980s the Chilean government has offered subsidized housing for those who will register their land titles individually, thereby weakening the communal power of the Rapanui over themselves. While Rapanui are the recognized owners of the land, much of the land is still without title, and since Chilean law gives usage rights to all citizens, non-indigenous people often come to Rapa Nui and setup businesses catering to the tourist trade on Rapanui land. While this is technically illegal, the Chilean government is lax on enforcement and protest is ongoing at the time of this writing.47

Since the 1960s and the closure of the CEDIP the Rapanui now struggle with integration into the capitalist system via the two avenues of making a living on Rapa Nui – tourism and wage labor. With the construction of an airstrip in 1965 and the abandonment of the American satellite tracking station in 1972 (which left a large amount of materials such as vehicles and trailers behind, some in Rapanui hands), Rapa Nui started to experience the beginnings of the tourist trade. Currently the Rapanui are heavily involved in tourism; as in many of the Pacific islands, cultural tourism is dependent on the indigenous people who either market themselves and their culture, or see it marketed for them. The most recent data from 2010 shows that Rapa Nui receives the highest number of tourists per capita in the world, hosting almost 50,000 annually - an amount over nine times the total population.48 The necessity to market their culture and land has resulted in much of Rapa Nui being designated as protected and unavailable to build on or farm. Concurrent with Rapanui dependence on tourism is the dependence on the Chilean state apparatus. Wage labor is necessary in Rapa Nui and three-fourths of the island’s population either works for the government or is dependent on someone who does.49 That their income comes from only tourism and government spending puts the Rapanui in a precarious position. With little familial support outside of Rapa Nui the vast majority of jobs are restricted to tourism or government wage labor; this, combined with the pressure of the Chilean government to choose individual land titles, has left the Rapanui almost totally dependent on forces outside of their control for their subsistence, just as they have been since annexation in 1888.

From first contact the Rapanui have struggled against Europeans that saw the Rapanui as curiosities inhabiting a blasted landscape, a pool for slave labor, and a primitive people standing in the way of capitalistic notions of land use. For the Rapanui, annexation by Chile in 1888 during the high point of European imperialism changed little (though during the ranching era their land underwent significant change), as they continued to exist as virtual prisoners on the edge of a second rate Pacific empire. The establishment of Rapa Nui as an official part
of the Chilean state brought some positive change to the Rapanui in the form of access to education and a better standard of living, but at the cost of almost total reliance on the Chilean government and tourism. The image of the exotic Pacific Islander has changed little over the centuries; it continues to draw tourists from all over the world to Rapa Nui and likely will in the future. How the Rapanui can control and benefit from this, while minimizing the damages inherent in tourism and government dependence, is a question central to their survival as an indigenous people.

Footnotes

1 Many different names are used for the island commonly known as Rapa Nui, Te Pito o Te Heaua, Easter Island, Isla de Pascua (Spanish). I will use Rapa Nui throughout this essay as this is what the original inhabitants (known as Rapanui) choose to call their home.

2 That Rapa Nui could have been settled from mainland South America is possible, as proved in the 1947 Kon-Tiki expedition, however the similarities of the Rapanui language to that of other Polynesian languages strongly suggests a Polynesian origin.


4 It is a common theory that the Rapanui destroyed their forests leading to an increasing instability and a decline in productivity, when in fact much of the forest was destroyed by the sheep introduced by the Scottish CEDIP (Easter Island Exploitation Company). From J. Douglas Porteous, “Easter Island: The Scottish Connection,” Geographical Review Vol. 68 No. 2 (1978), 153.

5 J. Douglas Porteous in The Modernization of Easter Island combines the opinions of Alfred Métraux and Robert Casey to show their naked bias and contempt for the land: “A monstrous pumice-stone, an enormous scoria, a prodigious slagheap...that is the best definition of Easter Island”

6 McCall, 33.


8 McCoy, 97.


10 McCoy, 97.

11 McCall, 36

12 McCall, 33.

13 McCall, 30.

14 This is of course where the name ‘Easter Island’ originates.

15 The Spanish Captain, Gonzáles, claimed the island for Spain. This claim is not seen to have any legal binding as Spain never sent another ship to trade with or colonize Rapa Nui.


17 As quoted in Porteous, The Modernization of Easter Island, 11.


McCall, 50.


McCall, 54.


McCall, 72.


Roussel, 429.

McCall, 62.

Porteous, The Modernization of Easter Island, 16.


Porteous, “Easter Island: The Scottish Connection,” 149.


Porteous, The Modernization of Easter Island, 66


Porteous, The Modernization of Easter Island, 73.


Maria Pereyra-Uhrle, 136.

Porteous, The Modernization of Easter Island, 81.

Maria Pereyra-Uhrle, 137.

Maria Pereyra-Uhrle, 137.

McCall, 70.

McCall, 72-73.

McCall, 123.
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