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The Secrets of Easter Island

The more we learn about the remote island from archaeologists and researchers, the more intriguing it becomes



The legendary Moai statues have fascinated modern civilization since their discovery. ([Arian Zwegers](#))

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Sometimes, says Cristián Arévalo Pakarati, an island artist who has worked with several archaeologists, the old stories hold as much truth as anything the scientists unearth. He tells me this as we climb up the cone of a volcano called Rano Raraku to the quarry where the great moai were once carved. The steep path winds through an astonishing landscape of moai, standing tilted and without order, many buried up to their necks, some fallen facedown on the slope, apparently abandoned here before they were ever moved. Pakarati is dwarfed by a stone head as he stops to lean against it. “It’s hard to imagine,” he says, “how the carvers must have felt when they were told to stop working. They’d been carving these statues here for centuries, until one day the boss shows up and tells them to quit, to go home, because there’s no more food, there’s a war and nobody believes in the statue system anymore!” Pakarati identifies strongly with his forebears; working with Jo Anne Van Tilburg, an archaeologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, he’s spent many years making drawings and measurements of all the island’s moai. (He and Van Tilburg have also teamed up to create the new *Galería Mana*, intended to showcase and sustain traditional artisanry on the island.)

Now, as Pakarati and I climb into the quarry itself, he shows me where the carving was done. The colossal figures are in every stage of completion, laid out on their backs with a sort of stone keel attaching them to the bedrock. Carved from a soft stone called lapilli tuff, a compressed volcanic ash, several figures lie side by side in a niche. “These people had absolute control over the stone,” Pakarati says of the carvers. “They could move statues from here to Tahai, which is 15 kilometers away, without breaking the nose, the lips, the fingers or anything.” Then he points to a few broken heads and bodies on the slope below and laughs. “Obviously, accidents were allowed.”

When a statue was almost complete, the carvers drilled holes through the keel to break it off from the bedrock, then slid it down the slope into a big hole, where they could stand it up to finish the back. Eye sockets were carved once a statue was on its ahu, and white coral and obsidian eyes were inserted during ceremonies to awaken the moai’s power. In some cases, the statues were adorned with huge cylindrical hats or topknots of red scoria, another volcanic stone. But first a statue had to be moved over one of the roads that led to the island’s nearly 300 ahu. How that was done is still a matter of dispute. Rapa Nui legends say the moai “walked” with the help of a chief or priest who had mana, or supernatural power. Archaeologists have proposed other methods for moving the statues, using various combinations of log rollers, sledges and ropes.

Trying to sort out the facts of the island’s past has led researchers into one riddle after another—from the meaning of the

monuments to the reasons for the outbreak of warfare and the cultural collapse after a thousand years of peace. Apart from oral tradition, there is no historical record before the first European ships arrived. But evidence from many disciplines, such as the excavation of bones and weapons, the study of fossilized vegetation, and the analysis of stylistic changes in the statues and petroglyphs allows a rough historical sketch to emerge: the people who settled on the island found it covered with trees, a valuable resource for making canoes and eventually useful in transporting the moai. They brought with them plants and animals to provide food, although the only animals that survived were chickens and tiny Polynesian rats. Artistic traditions, evolving in isolation, produced a rich imagery of ornaments for the chiefs, priests and their aristocratic lineages. And many islanders from the lower-caste tribes achieved status as master carvers, divers, canoe builders or members of other artisan's guilds. Georgia Lee, an archaeologist who spent six years documenting the island's petroglyphs, finds them as remarkable as the moai. "There's nothing like it in Polynesia," she says of this rock art. "The size, scope, beauty of designs and workmanship is extraordinary."

At some point in the island's history, when both the art and the population were increasing, the island's resources were overtaxed. Too many trees had been cut down. "Without trees you've got no canoes," says Pakarati. "Without canoes you've got no fish, so I think people were already starving when they were carving these statues. The early moai were thinner, but these last statues have great curved bellies. What you reflect in your idols is an ideal, so when everybody's hungry, you make them fat, and big." When the islanders ran out of resources, Pakarati speculates, they threw their idols down and started killing each other.

Some archaeologists point to a layer of subsoil with many obsidian spear points as a sign of sudden warfare. Islanders say there was probably cannibalism, as well as carnage, and seem to think no less of their ancestors because of it. Smithsonian forensic anthropologist Douglas Owsley, who has studied the bones of some 600 individuals from the island, has found numerous signs of trauma, such as blows to the face and head. But only occasionally, he says, did these injuries result in death. In any case, a population that grew to as many as 20,000 was reduced to only a few thousand at most when the captains of the first European ships counted them in the early 18th century. Over the next 150 years, with visits by European and American sailors, French traders and missionaries, Peruvian slave raiders, Chilean imperialists and Scottish ranchers (who introduced sheep and herded the natives off the land, fencing them into one small village), the Rapa Nui people were all but destroyed. By 1877 there were only 110 natives left on the island.

Although the population rebounded steadily through the 20th century, native islanders still don't own their land. The Chilean government claimed possession of Easter Island in 1888 and, in 1935, designated it a national park, to preserve thousands of archaeological sites. (Archaeologist Van Tilburg estimates that there could be as many as 20,000 sites on the island.) Today, about 2,000 native people and about as many Chileans crowd into the island's only village, Hanga Roa, and its outskirts. Under growing pressure, the Chilean government is giving back a small number of homesteads to native families, alarming some archaeologists and stirring intense debate. But though they remain largely dispossessed, the Rapa Nui people have re-emerged from the shadows of the past, recovering and reinventing their ancient art and culture.

Carving a small wooden moai in his yard, Andreas Pakarati, who goes by Panda, is part of that renewal. "I'm the first professional tattooist on the island in 100 years," he says, soft eyes flashing under a rakish black beret. Panda's interest was stirred by pictures he saw in a book as a teenager, and tattoo artists from Hawaii and other Polynesian islands taught him their techniques. He has taken most of his designs from Rapa Nui rock art and from Georgia Lee's 1992 book on the petroglyphs. "Now," says Panda, "the tattoo is reborn."

Other artists of Panda's generation are also breathing new life into old art. In his small studio that doubles as living space, the walls lined with large canvases of Polynesian warriors and tattooed faces, Cristián Silva paints Rapa Nui themes with his own touch of swirling surrealism. "I paint because I appreciate my culture," he says. "The moai are cool, and I feel connected to ancestral things. On this island you can't escape that! But I don't copy them. I try to find a different point of view."

The dancers and musicians of the Kari Kari company, shouting native chants and swaying like palms in the wind, are among the most striking symbols of renewal. "We're trying to keep the culture alive," says Jimmy Araki, one of the musicians. "We're trying to recuperate all our ancient stuff and put it back together, and give it a new uprising." Dancer Carolina Edwards, 22, arrives for a rehearsal astride a bright red all-terrain vehicle, ducks behind some pickup trucks on a hill overlooking one of the giant statues and emerges moments later in the ancient dress of Rapa Nui women, a bikini made of tapa, or bark cloth. "When I was little they used to call me tokerau, which means wind, because I used to run a lot, and jump out of trees," she says, laughing. "Most of the islanders play guitar and know how to dance. We're born with the music."

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