



The Resilience of Easter Island

**A Historical Ethnography
by**

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Introduction and acknowledgements

Tuesday, April 30th 2013: Long live the King!

Together with my wife and two children I was walking through the mainstreet of Hanga Roa, the capital of Easter Island. On the other side of the world Willem-Alexander had just been inaugurated as king of The Netherlands. Unfortunately, we were not able to see much of the inauguration. Easter Island, an island in the middle of the Pacific and one of the most remote places in the world was not paying any attention to this special event. Yet the island has an indelible link with The Netherlands since the Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen discovered the island on Easter Sunday 1722 and gave it the name by which it is known all over the world today. People are talking about this island ever since the ‘discovery’ of the megalithic statues, known as moai.

The Rapa Nui did not understand why we were dressed in orange with accents of red, white and blue on this April 30th. Some of them who could not resist to ask, were told that we wanted to reflect our heritage on this special day. Given the time they were probably the first foreigners to be informed that The Netherlands was now ruled by a new king.

Together with my family, I walked towards Ahu Akivi, a platform with seven moai which are the only ones that are not facing inland but towards the vast Pacific Ocean which we had sailed with the MS Marina to come here. During our first days we have visited the petroglyphs in the cave Ana Kai Tangata, the ceremonial centre of Orongo, the moai quarry Rano Raraku, Ahu Tongariki and the beach of Anakena. Each archaeological site was well worth a visit.

Our daughter Emma, who would celebrate her fifth birthday within only a few days, knew what to expect on Easter Island. However, so short after Easter Sunday 2013, our three year old son Valentijn still clinged on to the idea that Easter Island was completely covered with chocolate eggs and intended to eat them all. Despite the fact that he had found not a single egg (and chocolate eggs seems to have a magical appeal to him), our visit to Easter Island did not turn into a disappointment. Instead, Easter Island was one big discovery, a place where every square metre had more to discover than Disneyland.

After our visit to Ahu Akivi we returned to Hanga Roa by taxi. We decided to walk back from the Catholic Church to the harbour. We wanted to enjoy our last moments on Easter Island and absorb the magical atmosphere we were surrounded with.

We stopped at the playground at the end of the street near the cemetery. Emma and Valentijn were just playing on the swing when a class of fifteen children came to the playground. The teacher started to give music lessons on the field near the coast and our children watched fascinated. After the music lessons, the children were allowed to play on the playground and soon started to talk to Emma and Valentijn. The boys were impressed by the dogtag which Valentijn wore around his neck. This dogtag included his name, country of origin, ship’s

name and our phonenumber in case of emergency. However, the Rapa Nui children recognized this dogtag as those from the computer game Call of Duty for Sony Playstation. First contact was made immediately followed by an enthusiastic game of tag.

After a relaxing time at the playground we started our walk along the rough coastline of the Bay of Cook. While Valentijn was sleeping in the stroller, Emma told us she had fallen in love with Easter Island and did not want to leave. We felt exactly the same as our daughter. However, 45 minutes later we left Easter Island in a sloop towards our ship for the last time. Nevertheless, we took Easter Island with us in our memories and our hearts...

Wednesday, May 1st 2013: Mooiaajs

I was just finishing my travelreport when my son Valentijn came running to me with his shirt in his hands. Within a few minutes we would have dinner with Peter and Jean from Canada, whom we met on board during a safety drill. During our diners we were discussing various topics like immigration in The Netherlands and Canada, the flooding of our polders and naturally our monarchy.

While I buttoned the shirt of my son he suddenly said: “Daddy, I want to go back to those Mooiaajs!” Curious about what he could have recorded in his little head, I asked him: “Where are those Mooiaajs then?” To which he replied: “Easter Island!” “And why do you want to go back to those Mooiaajs?” I asked. To which he replied in his limited vocabulary: “Well, because I think so nice are Mooiaajs!”

Perhaps this is the most beautiful thing about Easter Island: you can enjoy the imposing remains left by the early Rapa Nui without even knowing anything about it. However, this is also the possible pitfall. Without knowing the truth, there is room for stories based on fantasy which are then considered facts by the majority of the world.

An outdated view of Easter Island

Today, the image of Easter Island is one of a civilization which was responsible for its own collapse. After a brief period of prosperity, the population would have grown up to 20,000. A peaceful civilization under the leadership of an enlightened king resulted in a period of great artistic expression. The moai (megalithic statues) and the hieroglyphic script rongorongo are the most famous examples. However, this period could not last forever, and the Rapa Nui soon ended up in a downward spiral. In order to create the many moai they would have cut all trees on the island. Once the last trees were cut their civilization fell into chaos and civil wars arose between long-ears and short-ears. This chaos resulted in the birdmancult in which the most brutal warriors could gain annual leadership over the island. Famine arose on this remote and barren island. Cannibalism was rampant and parents would have killed their children to satisfy

their lust for human flesh. This would have been the situation when Easter Island was discovered by Jacob Roggeveen on Easter Sunday 1722.

For many years, Easter Island is used as an example for the entire world. A small island in the vast Pacific Ocean is easy to compare with our little planet in the vast universe. Especially Jared Diamond is a major representative of this philosophy. He connected the ‘collapse’ of Easter Island with our own contemporary attitude toward the environment. Diamond asks himself whether we will have a similar collapse or if we are able to learn from the past and protect our civilization for such a fate. In this book we will see that the current view of Easter Island is completely false and that we have been asking ourselves the wrong questions based on false assumptions.

In all likelihood Easter Island never had a population of 20,000 inhabitants and although nowadays there are some disagreements about whether the Rapa Nui cut all the trees at their island at all, researchers agree that this was not done for the production of the many moai. Also, there were probably no large civil wars between the long-ears and short-ears. In fact, there were no long-ears and short-ears at all. Famine was not an issue when Roggeveen and later explorers visited the island. On the contrary, according to many of them the island was so fertile that the Rapa Nui only had to work a few days to provide themselves with the basic necessities of life. Finally, cannibalism seems to have been unknown on Easter Island. In any case, there is no evidence to support the claims of nineteenth century missionaries.

Acknowledgements

After a long preparation, I finally set foot on Easter Island for the first time in April 2013. A dream of many years came true. Despite the fact that I had read many books and travelreports, I was unknown to this beautiful island. I thank my host Edith Pakarati for her advise, logistic support and hospitality, as well as our guide Larry for his kindness and information about the island. They brought us to many interesting places and pointed out some small but important details.

During my trip I was joined by my wife and dear children Emma and Valentijn. They followed us during our entire stay without any resistance. I was able to study all archeological sites quietly. While I studied Ahu Nau Nau, our children were feeded by the queen of the empañadas or played on the beach of Anakena. For them Easter Island was a fantastic place to explore. They simply made contact with Rapa Nui children so I could quickly make contact with their parents or grandparents. I will always be grateful to them for this beautiful time on Easter Island.

My dear wife Monique has helped me tremendously to turn my finished manuscript into a readable document. Not only linguistically, but also by critically reading the text and to ask questions about unclear passages. However, most of all I am grateful because she selflessly and lovingly supports me in all my travels, how far and uncomfortable they may be.

Finally, I like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for the availability of information, archives, photos and images: Brigid Mulloy, José Altamirano, Christian Rapu, Ian Sewell, Daniel Boyland, Sémhur, Marcus Edensky and Alicia Ika of Easter Island Travelling, Museo Antropológico Padre Sebastián Englert, The Easter Island Foundation and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Jkr. Dr. S.E.M. Roeling
Bergschenhoek, May 2015

*“And we gave this land the name
of Easter Island, since it was
discovered and found on Easter day.”*

Jacob Roggeveen, April 5th 1722

Almost three hundred years after the Dutch discovery, Easter Island still fascinates the entire world. Thousands of tourists visit the island to see the megalithic statues called moai.

It is assumed that deforestation of the island by the Rapa Nui led to a cultural collapse. A brief period of prosperity was followed by a long period of chaos due to the misuse of natural resources to transport the spectacular moai. When Roggeveen visited the island, the Rapa Nui would have been hungry thieves, prostitutes and cannibals. Easter Island became an example to environmentalists as a warning for the entire planet.

In this book, Roeling shows that the current image of Easter Island is completely false. He demonstrates that the use of firewood is the true reason of the deforestation, not the transport of the moai or, as recently suggested, the Polynesian Rats. However, while describing all aspects of Rapa Nui culture, religion and history, he also shows that deforestation did not lead to famine, war and cannibalism. The loving and caring Rapa Nui developed innovative changes in agriculture and a new birdman-cult to restore the order on the island. Their resilience is an example for the entire world rather than a warning.



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ISBN 978-1-326-32911-2



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