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The end of the world at the end of the earth: Retrospective eschatology on Rapanui (Easter Island)¹

Grant McCall
University of Sydney

Abstract

There are three stories about the end of the world as the Rapanui knew it, one from foundation myth, another from long ago and the LAST more recent.

Just as it was the dream of Haumaka that showed the way to the first inhabitants of Rapanui, perhaps two thousand years ago, so it was the dream of Hakarevareva a te niu that foretold the end. Hakarevareva was a seer/priest like Haumaka and one morning he excitedly told his fellow islanders that large houses, strange people and outlandish animals would come to Rapanui and that their way of life would change forever. People who remember and tell this story say that Hakarevareva saw the coming of Europeans with their buildings and different animals in the 19th century, although it was to be about 142 years after the first contact before one of those odd visitors would come to stay, bringing his peculiar foreign ways that overwhelmed the comfortable Rapanui ones.

The other story about the end comes from 1965 and was not a prediction, but many people think a statement of fact. The skull of Hotu Matu'a, the founding culture hero who turned voyaging Polynesians into Rapanui had been kept in a secret place in his adopted homeland. It gave the Islanders the mana of protection, even ameliorating the effects of the resident outsiders. However, in 1964, a French author and adventurer persuaded three Rapanui to let him borrow that skull. When the adventurer departed and became the most widely published French writer about the island, so departed the mana of the place. People began to die young, forsake their language and what had been Rapanui for so long began to slip away. Foreign visitors and Rapanui who live in foreign parts alike have been sent to find the skull which if it returns to Rapanui will restore the old order OF peace and harmony.

The title? Apart from Rapanui, Easter Island also is known as Tepito o Tehenua, which many non-Rapanui translate as "the navel of the earth". Just as many Rapanui use Polynesian polysemy and render the translation as "the end of the earth".

Keywords: Rapanui, Easter Island, Pacific Islands, Ritual, Godelier

¹ This paper was presented first at the University of Sydney Department of Anthropology two day symposium "Anthropology and the End of Worlds", 25-26 March 2010.

Introduction

In the last few years, Maurice Godelier (2003; 2004; 2007; 2008; 2010b) has been making his way through what for him are major concepts in the social sciences, defining what he means by them and how he thinks they might be improved in current practice. Most recently, he (Godelier 2010a) proposes an examination of the concepts of 'Community', 'Society' and 'Culture', which the sub-title of his paper calls 'three keys to understanding today's conflict identities'.

My purpose is to draw some conclusions from Godelier's Durkheimian approach at the end of this paper that I think help me to understand Rapanui views of the end of the world from where they stand, as they say, at the end of the world. I will discuss three ends of the Rapanui world that people have discussed with me over the years on Rapanui:

- The foundation of the place through the vision of *Haumaka*;
- The foundation of the new Rapanui through the vision of *Hakarevareva 'a Te Niu* (herein after, *Hakarevareva*);
- The foundation of today's Rapanui through the theft of a prized skull.

This paper has been long developing since I first was told of *Hakarevareva's* vision in the past of the future of his Easter Island, which the people of that place call *Rapanui*; they also call themselves and their language *Rapanui*, although that designation can be documented to about 1862-1863 when fellow Polynesians enquired of those Islanders their origin.²

The people of Rapa, in the Austral group, who sometimes called their place '*Rapaiti*' had in their origin story their ancient homeland as 'Rapanui', the former meaning little Rapa and the latter big Rapa. As the people of Rapa and their neighbours tried to understand where the Easter Islanders they met derived, they thought it might be the ancestral homeland of the people of Rapa. So, *Rapanui* came into being, a mythical land reborn as a remote, nostalgic and far away place.³ *Rapanui* have an origin story as well. They believe they came from *Maraerenga*, a distant and beautiful ('*renga*') place where they lived since the origin of everything. One day, the ariki of *Maraerenga*, *Hotu Matu'a*, consulted his seer or priest, called *Haumaka*. *Haumaka* had a dream of a distant place, no where as pleasant as *Maraerenga*, but capable of supporting life. *Haumaka* visited that island, flying over the topography, naming some places, telling *Hotu Matu'a* about it on his return. Now, ancestral *Maraerenga* came to be swamped shortly after that. The swamping could have been water or a defeat in battle, depending on the source of the tradition in the literature. Most

² 'Easter Island' derives from the first documented European visit to the place in 1722, sighted on Easter Sunday, so the name. 'Rapanui' is explained above. In spelling that toponym, Chilean writers render it 'Rapa Nui'; *Rapanui* themselves write it 'Rapanui', in common with unsyllabified place names in the rest of Oceania. I follow the *Rapanui* (and more Oceanic) rendering.

³ The people of *Rapaiti* met the people of *Rapanui* in the course of the 1861-2 slave trade, originating in Peru, but touching many Pacific island places. See McCall (1976; Maude 1981)

of my sources said it was a battle. In the face of the conqueror, Hotu Matu'a and his followers were obliged to leave Maraerenga and with Haumaka's aid, to find their new home. As they voyaged, three men/spirits were sent ahead to explore the place. They too moved over the place and one of them became caught in the rocks at one point and died there. The other two knew that Hotu Matu'a and his followers were arriving and went to the place today called 'Orongo', the call, a promontory looking to the southeast. As the flotilla of refugees from Maraerenga were sailing towards them, one of the men picked up a handful of earth and shouted to Hotu Matu'a and his followers, '*Kainga kino*', useless land, meaning that their new sub-tropical home was not as fertile as Maraerenga. So, the foundation of what became Rapanui today was in disappointment and loss, a perspective some Rapanui consider ruefully from time to time when they contemplate their sub-tropical and rocky island home, particularly as it is today after over a century of sheep ranching.

Archaeologists differ in the dating, but not the sequence of the island's history (see Hunt and Lipo 2008; Orliac and Orliac 2008). I favour a fourth century date for foundation (McCall 1979), giving the Rapanui about a thousand years to develop their unique megalithic art and architecture, that came to an end in the, most researchers agree fourteen century (cf Orliac & Orliac 2008).

Without going into details, the next landmark is the vision or dream (*moevarua*) of Hakarevareva. Hakarevareva was a seer and a priest, like Haumaka, and in the post-megalithic phase of Rapanui history, he would have had daily duties for his Ariki as well as taking part in the annual climate based island-wide ceremonial that took place at Orongo (same place as the earlier first arrival announcement noted above).⁴ The purpose of the more than a month long Orongo ceremonial was to select through ordeal the Arikimau, or overall ruler of the entire island. According to one count, there were 243 Orongo (McCall 1994). The precise number of times the Orongo took place is less important than the fact that the ceremonial was marked over a considerable period of time. Hakarevareva had a vision of the future of the island that would spell the end of the life as everyone knew it. All that was familiar would disappear and it would be replaced by people much like the Rapanui but who behaved in extraordinary ways and had with them extraordinary things. They brought square houses to Rapanui; they wore different clothing than the Rapanui, over their entire body; they had odd and unknown animals with them, including one large one on which they would ride, to move about the island.⁵ These things were not particularly terrifying, but they were different and all would be changed because of their arrival.

When Hakarevareva had his vision was not clear to my informants. As St Stephen of Byzantium said, 'Myth is something that never was, but always is'. It could have been before the Dutch captain Jakob Rog

⁴ I write in short hand 'climate based'. Without going into detail, the Orongo took place at the beginning of the austral spring. It commenced when the manutara – Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscatus*) – came to Rapanui in late August or September, to lay its eggs on a couple of small offshore islands. The arrival of the familiar bird signaled the end of the island's harsh, sub-tropical winter.

⁵ The story teller makes it clear that this is a horse, called in Rapanui *Hoi*: they are plentiful on the island today and used for transporting those who do not own motorized vehicles (or who vehicles no longer function or are too expensive to run)

geveen arrived on Easter Sunday 1722. Or it could have been after when Rapanui used to build earth mounds in the shape of ships (*miro o'one*) and practice manipulating their dealings with outsiders. On those *miro o'one*, Rapanui would play both the visitor and local roles; they were entertainments as well as ways of practicing exchange techniques with the outsiders, I was told. They were not serious affairs and often involved humour, such as successfully duping the visitor into accepting a less than satisfactory exchange. The *miro o'one* was a public entertainment that probably was island based since there are few of these identified in the archaeology of the island. Like all public entertainment, it builds solidarity and reference points for people to relate to one another. Hakarevareva's vision must have been before 1864, though, for that was the year when a lone missionary Lay Brother became the first outsider to live on Rapanui and to bring the things Hakarevareva had predicted, if for the horses that arrived with the second missionary landing in 1866.

The name 'Hakarevareva' is in my genealogies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but people used to repeat the names of well-known and venerated people, so that does not fix the seer and prophet in any time: that probably is appropriate for such an influential exceptional personage.

Between 1722 and 1862, the latter being the date of decimating and savage slave raids (from Peru) on Easter Island, there were over one hundred ships that called for various purposes, mainly exploration and trade (McCall 1976; Maude 1981). When people asked the local name of Easter Island, they were given different ones. Cook experienced this and was aware that Polynesians often did not have a name for the entire island, but for places on it. So, the marvellous map of ca 5000 places made by Tupaia in collaboration with Banks and Cook, was not of 5000 islands, but destinations to which someone might want to sail (Druett 2010; Lewthwait 1970; Salmond 2008).

Amongst the names told by the locals to various foreign visitors to Easter Island was *Tepito o tehenua*. Sometimes, just '*Tepito*'. People usually translate '*Tepito o tehenua*' as 'the navel of the earth'; indeed, there are books about Rapanui with that title in their respective languages. But '*Tepito*' can mean also the end or the tip, so the translation as some Rapanui wryly remark today, can mean 'the end of the earth' as it is in my title: the most extreme and the most remote place at the end of the earth. The place from which one can go no farther.

There is some justification for that 'end' designation as Rapanui is the world's most remote inhabited place, at 149 on the United Nations scale of island remoteness: 149 is the most isolated on the scale and that is Rapanui.⁶ After the slave raids mentioned above and the arrival of Catholic priests from the French 'Sacred Hearts' or 'Picpus' Order in 1866, there was more contact with France, more inquisitive expeditions. In 1888, a South American country, Chile, to fulfil its self-proclaimed destiny as the inheritor of Spain's Pacific hegemony, needed a colony and the only one remaining was Isla de Pascua, as they called it. So, after asking France if it was OK to make the claim, they did so in the form of Captain Policarpo Toro Hur-

⁶ The URL for the Rapanui entry in this very useful and complete database is: <http://islands.unep.ch/IXE.htm#271/>

tado, who promptly installed his brother (an army officer) as the manager of the sheep ranch on the island. Eventually, Isla de Pascua became a large sheep ranch, but instead of putting the animal livestock (sheep, cattle and pigs) in pens, they put a fence around the Islanders, forbidding them to travel even to parts of their own island, let alone anywhere else. All that changed in 1966 when Isla de Pascua became an incorporated territory of Chile and the Islanders full citizens. After that, until the present day, the ‘Pascuences’⁷, as Chilean writers often refer to the Rapanui, developed autonomously an industry they had been practicing with some success: the reception of visitors, or tourism, which brings about 70,000 people to the place annually for a resident indigenous population of less than 4,000.⁸

But I have left behind the last ‘end of the world’ and that took place in 1966 when Rapanui’s isolation from the rest of the planet ceased; when Islanders could travel; when many more outsiders came to reside on the place; when everything did change with 24 hour television, over a hundred taxis, hundreds of cars, motorbikes and trucks, telephones (fixed line and mobile), broadband wireless internet and plastic packaging. There even is a Hummer painted black with frosted windows getting about the place, owned by an itinerant wealthy Frenchman who claims to be a gypsy. What brought about that dramatic series of changes? According to many of my (not always older) informants, it was the loss of the skull of Hotu Matu’a that is responsible. Remember him? He was the Rapanui culture hero who led the foundation fleet and whilst most of his body went back to Maraerenga when he died, his skull remained in a secret place on Rapanui, guarded by trusted Islanders, from father to son and so on. Most people never had seen the skull. It never was brought out in public or otherwise on display. It was a secret that everyone knew, but only a couple of people knew the location of the sequestered relic.⁹ There was no ceremonial or time of the year when the skull might be shown. The guardians may or may not have visited it, together or alone: it was hidden from view, but not consciousness. Well, in 1964, a French adventurer, born in Tahiti, he said, Francis Mazière¹⁰ came to Rapanui, to Tepito o tehenua to make a documentary, write a few books, including a children’s one, and acquire artefacts for sale in his native France. He did all those things, including his book, copied almost entirely from a rare 1948 Chilean published one (Englert 1948). Mazière (1968)’s book in many languages and editions, remaining a best seller and often is the only title that French visitors know when they come to the island (See McCall 1995).¹¹ With his six months residence and his Tahitian wife, Mazière became intimate with many Rapanui families. He was in sympathy with the Islander’s plight, and publicised on many occasions to Chile’s embarrassment that government’s ill treatment of the Islanders. Amongst many items he acquired during his sojourn, were some skeletons from caves and other burial places, as well as commissioning a number of carvings that he sold as genuine ancient pieces. Near the end of his stay, he found out

7 From the Spanish Isla de Pascua; to Pascuence for some who is from that place.

8 I have discussed all this in detail elsewhere (McCall 2008).

9 Some few people have ventured to ask me if I think the skull ever really did exist as only the guardians knew its location.

10 According to the Bibliothèque Nationale website entry for one of his books (Mazière 1984) Mazière was born in 1924 and died in 1994 <http://catalogue.bnf.fr>.

11 Mazière himself cultivated an image of the urbane scientist and defender of the weak. French speakers can appreciate his public persona by looking at a 37 minute interview made for French television, broadcast on 14 October 1965 and available for viewing at the website of the Institut national de l’audiovisuel <http://www.ina.fr>. The interviewer was Pierre Sabbagh, a media personality of the day and host of the program, ‘Le magazine des explorateurs (The Explorer’s Magazine)’.

about the skull, my informants said, of Hotu Matu'a and discovered to his pleasure that amongst the families he knew were the guardians of this culturally important artefact. The Frenchman asked to see the skull, with its elaborate carvings and large size. There were three men involved, but only one of them was the guardian. Mazière convinced his two friends to bring the Hotu Matu'a skull to him, which they did. Furthermore, he asked to borrow the skull and they let him take the precious object away. Some versions of the story have them taking clothing, even alcohol, at the time of the hand over. The skull of Hotu Matu'a never returned to the island and neither did Mazière. The two Mazière confederates led poor and diseased lives after that, they both told me separately: they firmly believed that they had been cursed. The actual guardian never had children and finished his days wandering on a hill side, where he died confused in a state of senile dementia. The guardian had told me some years before his sad death that he feared he would lose his mind for his transgression with the skull.

During my fieldwork from 1972 to 1974 and, again, from 1985 to 1986, I was begged to find Francis Mazière and to urge him, even force him, to return the precious skull: he told me in his flat in Paris in the 16th arrondissement in July 1986 that he knew nothing of the skull or the photograph in his book of it. Oh! The photograph, he corrected, yes, he sold that skull to a certain professor at the university medical school in Antwerp; which professor did not exist and which school amazingly, never had heard of Francis Mazière.

Since my 2001-2001 visit to and research on the island, a number of Rapanui and their supporters have tried to trace the skull that will restore Rapanui to its happy pre-1966 state and cure all the ills found there now such as the disappearance of the language, the large number of Chilean émigrés who marry Rapanui, the decline in respect by the young for the old, the growing use of cannabis (unless it is for old people to control their pain, of course), drunkenness, loud television and loud vehicles, just to mention a few things. These ills and problems are common Islander perceptions voiced in conversations amongst Rapanui and appear from time to time in journalistic reports about the place.

I return to Godelier, who argues that it is through ritual that community, culture and society are created, hence 'identity'. The common Rapanui belief in the skull gives the believing Rapanui local agency in the great changes that have taken place; to place them in an understanding with, even an influence on, modernity. It was a Rapanui artefact that had mighty power and when that Rapanui artefact was taken away, disaster befell the island and its people. It was not the coming of outsider influences, such as the American Air Force base on the island from 1966 to 1970 or so; it was not a change in Chilean policy towards the place. No, it was the skull, with the power of the ancestors that brought about the change by being stolen.¹²

¹² Whilst looking at the website for the Banaban people, who live mostly on Rabi Island, Fiji, I came across a similar skull stealing to explain changes on their place. In this case, it seems an archaeologist removed Teimanaia's from Te Aka village on Banaba. The website quotes: '...many Banabans believe that only when Teimanaia's skull is returned to its rightful place will their [Banaban] prosperity return' (http://www.banaban.com/contents/en-us/d90_search-teimanaia-skull.html). Given at least this story of an only distantly related people, a belief in the power of a skull to protect a people and their island would seem to be autochthonous and not deriving from fetishised Christian relics and their imagery, as suggested by one reviewer of this paper.

People also comment that they believe that Mazière suffered misfortunes of his own owing to the theft. They alleged that he suffered poor health and that his Tahitian wife had divorced him. Again, the power of Rapanui mana has its ability to do harm to the foreign miscreant and violator of sacred things, even if few people ever had viewed the object. They knew it was big – as the skull of any culture hero would be – and they knew that it had elaborate carvings on it. Again, as one would expect of such a sacred and powerful object. The belief in the skull does not involve a visible or specific ritual as such, but the professing of a belief, the recounting of the story. The ritual is in the story telling and, of course, for those who wish to participate in the myth, agreeing to the tale. I argue that myth is story and that telling (and listening to) the symbolic story is its ritual, building society, as Godelier concluded. The dealing with the superior power of the outsider, the Whiteman/Chilean, is done through a Rapanui cosmology or belief system in the power of the skull over the land and over people, even foreign ones. A number of indigenous cultures have stories about how their ancestors foresaw the changes that were going to take place; the Aztecs, for example, as told to me by Susan Drucker-Brown (1978) at Cambridge in 1986. She assured me that there were other examples that probably would be worthwhile following up one day: indigenous prophets that foresaw the invasion of their lands through the colonial enterprise.

By incorporating catastrophic or at least disturbing changes into the Rapanui power orbit and telling and believing stories about such things, people take charge of their destiny at the same time as they stamp themselves on history as a community and a culture; as an identity with a society: so the Rapanui have done with their stolen skull and its salience to the great changes over the last half-century.

Through ritual, society, culture and community are created, Godelier (2010) writes and I agree. I argue that accepting and believing in a myth – in Malinowski (1992)'s sense as a justification for a current state of affairs such as the end of the known world, as the Rapanui have done from their island situated at the end of the world, has created them as a society, given them the organisational ability of a community and the comfort of a heretofore common culture and ontology. Myth is demonstrated amongst a community by being enacted as ritual, much in the way that Lévi-Strauss (1974) saw the relationship between these two universal features of human society to promote and bolster ontological security.

As Godelier (2010:10) ends his account reflecting on his findings for the large scale society in which we live, I will do something like that. Similarly for those in modern society, there is a belief in an apocalypse, mentioned as 'global warming' by the keynote speaker at this conference, Michael Taussig. We create our community of believers, our society of actors and our culture of conviction by accepting that is the fate we have unless we change our ways by frugal living, careful shepherding of resources and, most publically, not using plastic bags. To demonstrate our adherence to those beliefs, we can install a photovoltaic system on our roof tops (thousands), put in rainwater tanks in our gardens (hundreds) or get a 'save the planet' sackcloth of humility bag from Coles, a major supermarket chain in Australia (one dollar). I display my adherence to our European developed world, Australian dialect, end of the world vision from the seers whose visions we respect and agree to abide. I hope that I can count on all of you in my audience to do the same

by buying your 'save the planet' shopping bag and carrying it with you on important occasions to demonstrate conclusively your adherence to a philosophy of caretaking our planet.

Society making ritual is in everyday life and it demonstrates that we are of the group, whether shopping bag or ritual story, told by many, to explain all.



<http://juniorlandcarechallenge.com/Coles/Coles.htm>

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