

EDMUNDO EDWARDS



ALEXANDRA EDWARDS

WHEN THE UNIVERSE WAS AN ISLAND

EXPLORING THE CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL COSMOS OF ANCIENT RAPA NUI

When the Universe Was an Island:
Exploring the Cultural and Spiritual Cosmos of Ancient Rapa Nui

Authors: Edmundo Edwards & Alexandra Edwards

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Preface

Easter Island, or Rapa Nui as the locals call it today, lies approximately 2,200 km East of Pitcairn—its closest inhabited neighbour—and about 3,700 km westwards of the Chilean coast. The island is barely visible on most maps, but its ancient inhabitants crafted hundreds of monolithic statues that have fascinated archaeologists, ethnographers, and the general public ever since outsiders first encountered this piece of land on Easter Sunday 1722.

It is nearly impossible to grasp the sheer enormity of the Rapanui constructions outside of the island for, while Rapa Nui is one of the largest open-air museums, the collections of Rapanui artefacts scattered in different museums are very small. Nevertheless, strewn along the surface of the island sit the remains of a remarkably complex culture where it is easy to witness the extraordinary achievements of the Rapanui people: the Rano Raraku statue quarry with nearly 400 statues in different stages of construction; the ceremonial platform of Ahu Tongariki with 15 standing statues, most more than 8 m high; the hundreds of petroglyphs and more than 50 houses at the ceremonial village of Orongo. Nevertheless, these represent only a fraction of the more than 22,000 archaeological features registered on the island so far. Next to the statues, or *moai*, rest the abandoned tools of those who carved these stone giants. In front of the large religious platforms lie the ruins of dozens of boat-shaped house foundations. All stoic reminders of the thousands of people who must have gathered there to venerate the *moai*. Many more secrets must lie beneath the surface of this isolated island and in the childhood memories of a few Rapanui elders.

Over the years several scholars have tried to answer the most persistent questions regarding the history of the Rapanui, yet relatively few have studied the religious principles that drove these ancient people to erect the colossal statues. Behind the scholarly inquiry

concerning the sequential development of the different archaeological structures, the methods of transportation of the *moai*, and—now less frequently—the origins of the Rapanui settlers, a few questions that demand curious attention have emerged together with some very interesting results. The “mystery of Easter Island” detracts from the findings of ethnologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars working hard to reveal the complexities of this unique culture. Some of the answers are actually much more fascinating than an elusive mystery. Although it is interesting to learn how the Rapanui managed to accomplish their challenging tasks—and this book certainly addresses those issues—we have concentrated our efforts to answer the questions of “who,” “what,” and “why.” As in, “Who were the Rapanui?” “What were their beliefs?” and “Why did they make those enormous statues and transport them over several kilometres of rugged terrain?” Even though Rapanui culture suffered great social, political, and economic transformations during its integration to larger world-systems in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there is enough data provided by local people, foreign explorers, missionaries, visiting ethnographers, and even seasonal travellers to render a genuine approach to these questions. Furthermore, this book strives to place Rapa Nui within the context of greater Polynesia and examine the correlations that existed between Rapanui traditions and those of other Polynesian localities, particularly Eastern Polynesia. Last but not least, we feel there is an intrinsic value in trying to understand the relationship between, man, gods, and nature, on one of the most isolated inhabited places on earth.

Edmundo Edwards & Alexandra Edwards

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