

# A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE RESTORATION AND RE-CONSTRUCTION OF CEREMONIAL SITES ON RAPA NUI (EASTER ISLAND) - A DISCUSSION OF THE RECYCLING OF STONES WITH 'MANA'

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## ABSTRACT

*Europeans discovered Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in 1722, but current research indicates that the initial colonization of the island occurred c.AD 800-1000. Ceremonial platforms (ahu) associated with giant anthropomorphic statues (moai) are numerous on Rapa Nui. Restoration and reconstruction, as well as additions of new features, occurred both during prehistory as well as in the contemporary society. During the latest prehistoric phase on Rapa Nui, the ceremonial sites with associated statues suffered destruction during the "civil war" of the "Huri Moai" period (c.AD 1600-1800). It was not until the beginning of the 1960s that the restoration and re-construction of sites started again. This time it was with international interests and support from UNESCO. A few of the over 300 monuments have since then been restored and their statues re-erected. The restoration work has created positive aspects for Rapanui people in terms of increasing tourism and reinforcing cultural identity. But it has also raised questions concerning how to restore, who should do it, and for whom it should be done? These are issues I address in this paper.*

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Rapa Nui (Easter Island) (Figure 1) was first visited by Europeans in 1722. The earliest secure evidence of settlement on the island is currently dated between AD 800 and 1000 (Skjølsvold 1994:105, 113; Martinsson-Wallin 1994:47, 2000:48). The initial settlers to the island probably came from East Polynesia, but subsequent contact with South American cultures is likely. The prehistoric occurrence of the sweet potato on Rapa Nui is an obvious result of this contact, and influences on Rapa Nui ceremonial architecture

and ritual activities tied to the Birdman cult could have resulted from this contact as well (Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2002:254).

The earliest secure evidence for the construction of ceremonial sites falls between AD 1000 and 1200, but the majority were probably built and used between AD 1200 and 1500 (Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2002:250, Table 2). Dated charcoal samples from the statue quarries at Rano Raraku indicate carving of statues between AD 1000 and 1600 (Skjølsvold 1961:343).

We really do not know exactly what the first ceremonial site on Rapa Nui looked like, but we do know from archaeological excavations that many were rebuilt, with different features added over time (Martinsson-Wallin 1994:137). The re-building of the monuments seems to have reflected both practical and ideological aspects.

Continuous rebuilding and re-use of the monuments is indicated in prehistoric times, and during the final prehistoric period the statues on the *ahu* were toppled and the platforms covered up or partly dismantled. The statue cult seems to have lost its importance, and the Birdman cult became more important and remained so until about 1870 (van Tilburg 1994).

During the early historical period, when missionaries arrived (1860s) and the island was annexed by Chile (1888), the use and re-use of the monuments ceased. But the former great monuments occasionally served as burial structures. The island was now transformed into a livestock ranch and the people fenced into Hangaroa and Mataverí villages.

A French adventurer, Dutroux-Bornier, bought land at Mataverí around 1869. He settled and acted as a chief in the area. Due to previous slave raids (1859-62), diseases brought by European contact, and disagreements between Dutroux-Bornier and the missionaries, a large part of the remaining Rapanui population moved with the missionaries to

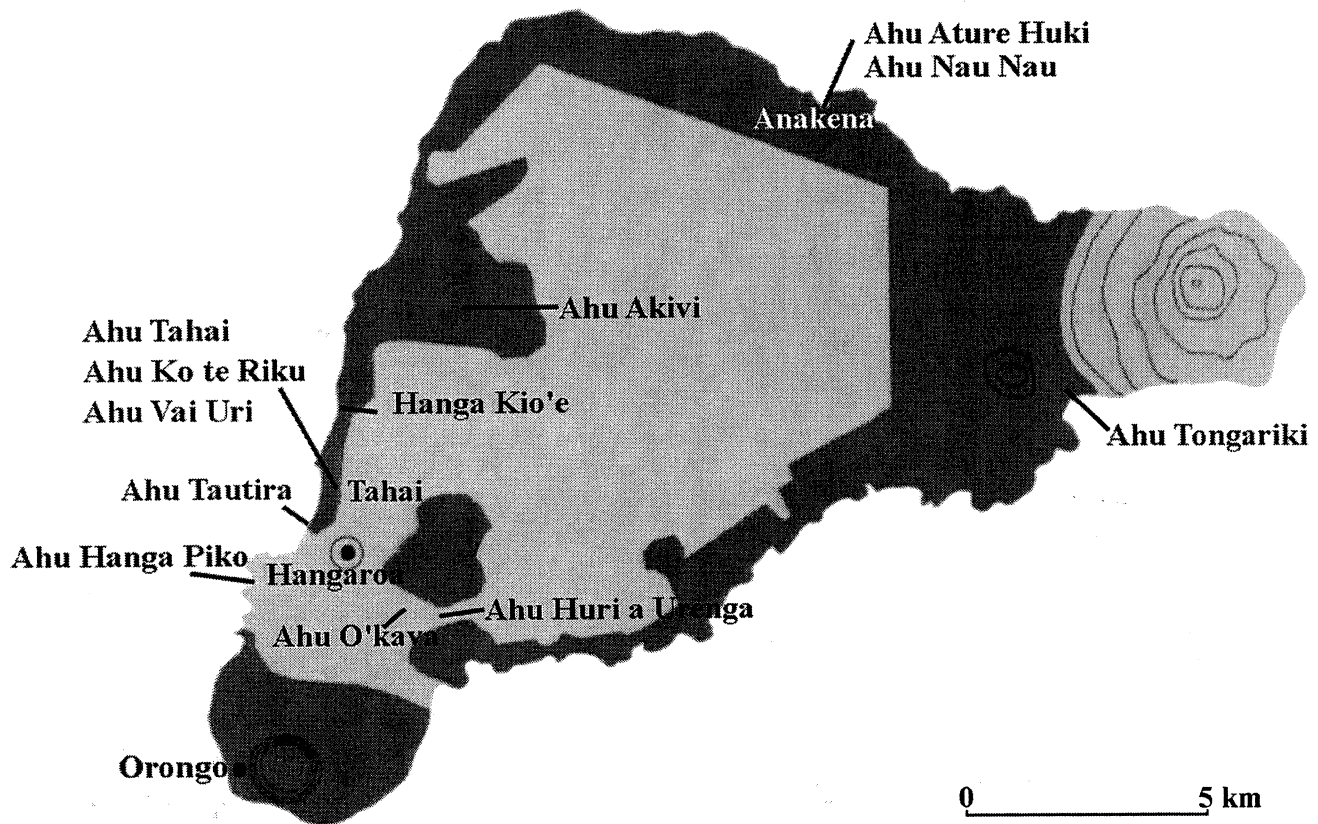


Figure 1: Map of Rapa Nui. Darker shade indicates area of National Park (after Charola 1994).



Figure 2: Ahu Ature Huki at Anakena cove was the first ahu with a re-erected moai (statue). (Photo P. Wallin).

Mangareva or to work on Brander's farm on Tahiti. According to Salmon's census in 1886, 155 Rapanui people remained on the island (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961:90).

When the Chilean state annexed the island they rented it to a businessman in Valparaiso. Since the islanders were robbed of their land they revolted in 1914, resulting in a minor land distribution from the state. By 1933, the island was ruled by the Chilean military, and in 1935 it was designated a national park and historical monument, but the population did not yet have any civil rights. They could not move freely around or leave the island without permission. In 1964-65, after protests from the Rapanui population, they finally became Chilean citizens and got their own municipality within the Valparaiso region (Charola 1994:29). During the time from the missionary arrival on the island in the 1860s, until the beginning of the 1960s, ceremonial sites only suffered minor alteration due to fence building or the grazing of animals.

Due to the international attention caused by the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition under the leadership of Thor Heyerdahl in 1955-56, interest in maintaining and restoring the old culture came into focus. During Heyerdahl's expedition, the first *moai* was re-erected on its ceremonial *ahu* platform (Figure 2) (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961:371). The island was now considered as a potential tourist attraction. An airfield was built at Mataverí in 1965, which opened for commercial flights in 1967 (Charola 1994:29).

In 1960, William Mulloy (University of Wyoming) and Gonzalo Figueroa (University of Chile), both members of Heyerdahl's expedition, started to restore *Ahu Akivi* (Figure 3) and *Ahu Vai Teka*. This was a pilot program supported by the University of Chile (Mulloy and Figueroa 1966, 1978).

After this restoration work, The Republic of Chile sent a request to the Museums and Monuments Division of UNESCO to carry out a general study of the island's monuments and to undertake a long-term program of archaeological restoration. The report *The Archaeological Heritage of Rapa Nui (Easter Island)*, published by Mulloy and Figueroa in 1966, led the International Fund for Monuments to establish the Easter Island Committee in 1967, for carrying out the archaeological restoration plan outlined in the UNESCO report. Two projects were started; an extensive survey of prehistoric sites and the restoration of ceremonial sites in the Tahai area (Mulloy 1975; Ayres 1973).

Patrick McCoy of the Department of Anthropology at Washington State University started the survey of prehistoric remains in 1968 (McCoy 1976). This work was later taken over by Claudio Cristino and Patricia Vargas, Instituto de Estudio Isla de Pascua, Universidad de Chile (Cristino 1986; Cristino and Vargas 1980; Cristino et al. 1981). William Ayres of the University of Wyoming carried out archaeological investigation and restoration at Tahai (*Ahu Tahai* and *Ahu Ko te Riku* 1968-70, *Ahu Vai Uri* 1970) (Ayres 1973; Mulloy 1970) (Figures 4-6). In 1972, Mulloy excavated and restored two *ahu* at Hanga Kio'e and *Ahu Huri a Urenga* (Mulloy 1973) (Figures 7, 8). In 1976, Mulloy started his last restoration work on *Ahu o Kava* before he passed away in 1978 (Charola 1994:37) (Figure 9).

During 1979-80, *Ahu Tautira* was excavated and restored by Charles Love (University of Wyoming), Andrea Seelenfreund (University of Chile), and the first indigenous Rapanui archaeologist Sergio Rapu (Seelenfreund 1988:69-93) (Figure 10). *Ahu Nau Nau* at Anakena was excavated and restored by Sergio Rapu in 1978-80 (Figure 11). *Ahu Tongariki* was reconstructed during 1992-96 by Claudio Cristino (Cristino and Vargas 1999: 67-69) (Figure 12). The most recent

*ahu* restoration/reconstruction is that by Sergio Rapu at *Ahu Hanga Piko* 1998 (Figure 13). A new restoration and preservation plan with the aid of UNESCO funds is on its way, under the leadership of William Ayres (University of Oregon), in collaboration with the university of Chile (Ayres pers. comm. 2002).

William Mulloy also restored the ceremonial village of Orongo, where the birdman cult was enacted, in 1974-76 (Mulloy 1975). In 1983 a re-restoration was done of one of the restored houses by Hans Niemeyer and Luis Arrau (Charola 1994:41) (Figure 14). A survey/inventory and restoration and conservation plan of the rock art at Orongo was made in 2001 by Elena Charola (pers. comm. 2002).

#### RESTORATION - POSSIBILITIES OR PROBLEMATICS?

There are mainly two reasons for restoration:

1. Monuments in ruins are not respected and can suffer more vandalism;
2. The restoration makes the monuments more understandable and can give a positive input into tourism.

There are no easy questions and answers concerning restoration. The destruction of the *ahu* structures on Rapa Nui was, for example, a part of the island's history. When restoration and archaeological investigation are carried out the monument is changed and some original data may be lost. It is important to be very cautious when such work is carried out. The monuments are often restored to the last phase before their deliberate destruction. One of the archaeologists who initiated restoration work on Rapa Nui, William Mulloy, strongly emphasised that the destruction

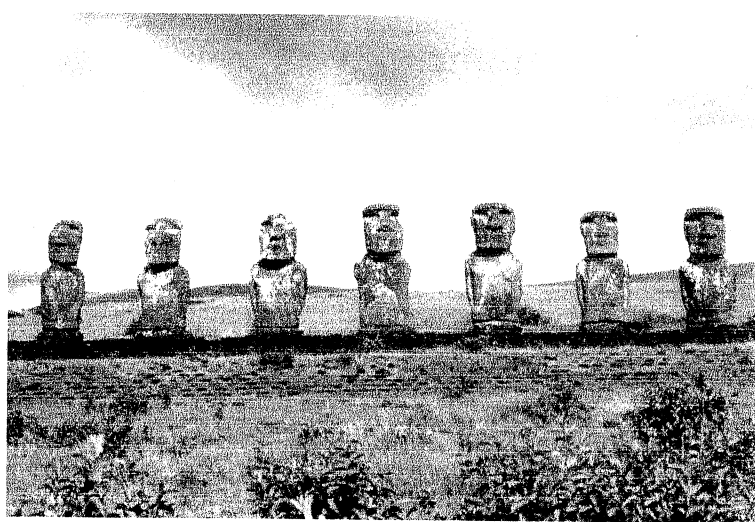


Figure 3: *Ahu Akivi* (photo P. Wallin).



Figure 4: *Ahu Tahai (in front), Ahu Ko te Riku (at back).*  
(photo A. Skjølsvold).

and abandonment of the *ahu* was an important phase. However, archaeological investigation can add information on the monument and to the prehistory of the island. Small carefully-planned investigations can often be done without altering the structure in any major way.

Preservation, however, is another thing. This serves to keep the monuments in good shape, but not to alter them. There are natural deterioration factors that act on stone in Rapa Nui, particularly rain, salty sea spray, algae and lichens, temperature changes and wind. Natural erosion of the monuments of Rapa Nui is now becoming rapidly more visible. During the 15 years I have been able to visit the island, I can see changes. Fortunately, good documentation of the prehistoric remains on the island is available for the last 50-100 years, so some changes can be tracked.

I mentioned earlier two main reasons for restoration, but a third reason can be added to the list, namely restoration as an act of identity. This focuses on the issue of "Who owns the past?" On Rapa Nui, these issues become complicated, since the island belong to Chile and especially since the National Park, where a large part of the visible monuments are located, became a World Heritage site in 1995. The National Park covers about 42% of the island's surface (Figure 1), and a major part of the rest of the island belongs to the state-owned farm SASIPA (Sociedad Agrícola y Servicios Isla de Pascua; Charola 1994:51). The local population has for a long time been very displeased with the fact that they actually own very little of their island. Protests and actions of groups claiming independence arose in the 1990s. In 1999 the Government of Chile started to distribute land plots to the Rapanui population. This includes about 1500 hectares taken out of the National Park (CONAF), which was

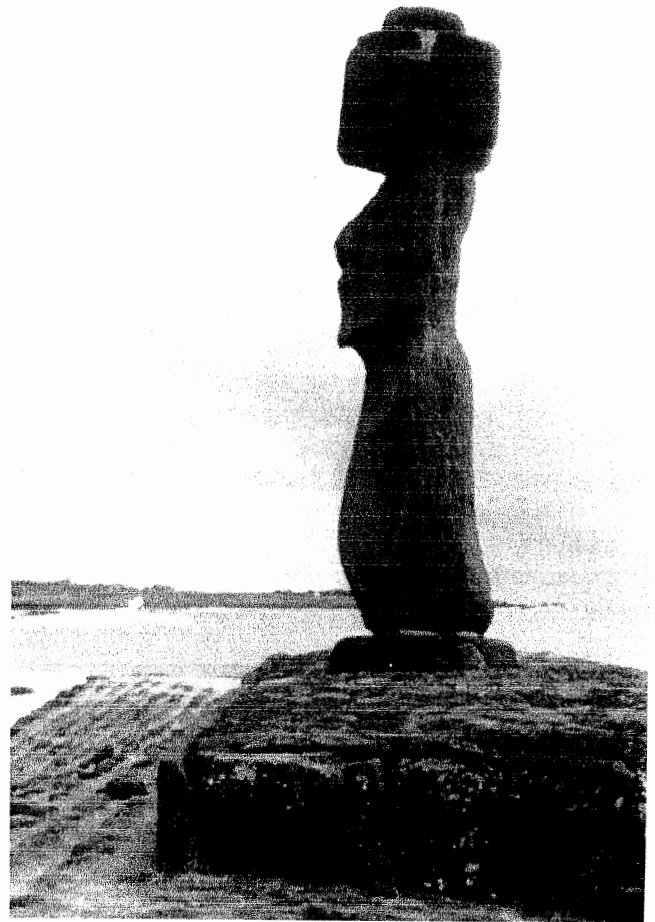


Figure 5: *Ahu Ko te Riku.*



Figure 6: *Ahu Vai Uri.*



Figure 7: Ahu at Hanga Kio'e (photo P. Wallin).



Figure 8: Ahu Huri a Urenga.

distributed amongst 267 islanders (Ramirez 2001:385). This land contains an abundance of prehistoric remains, most of them not visible on the surface. Originally, the land should have been distributed from farmland but World heritage land was used instead (Ramirez 2001:387). This action is naturally controversial, and different Rapanui or groups of Rapanui, as well as archaeologists, hold various views on the topic.

The land issue is even more controversial if we consider that Rapa Nui is a colony of Chile. As a way to recover cultural identity it is very understandable that the Rapanui want their land back. A group of young Rapanui also recently decided to go and restore some prehistoric remains, as for example some *hare moa* structures near La Pérouse bay. Different voices on Rapa Nui express different opinions about the land issue and the spontaneous restoration work. The following quotes are taken with permission from Paul Trachtman's article 'Who owns the Past? Rapanui points of view', published in *Rapa Nui Journal* (Trachtman 2002), but I recognise the different opinions from talking to people on the island during a visit in February-March 2002.

An artist, who also worked on archaeological excavations drawing maps, has put in an application for a parcel of land. He says the following:

I don't care if I've got a statue in my garden... That would be nice... I would take care of it with my heart and protect it quite well because I'm a Rapanui, it's my culture. Anyway, they are my ancestors... people think that archaeological artifacts are something separate from ourselves... We built them. (Trachtman 2002:5).

A Rapanui guide says the following: 'We need to take up the culture and reconstruct it and teach the children' (Trachtman 2002:7).

A Rapanui archaeologist suggested that the Rapanui should accept Chilean nationhood, but clearly show that they want rights to what they consider their property:

I've suggested to the government of Chile to allocate \$35 million to train people in preserving the monuments, hire teams of archaeologists and students... thanks to archaeology we have come to appreciate the culture... why can't the Rapanui today touch their monuments, handle it, and be part of it... Rapanui students have the moral right to be engaged before anybody else... to have some experience in construction, to understand how stones fit together... So the experience of children with the *ahu*, from an early age, is to the benefit of preserving our culture for the future... (Trachtman 2002:6).

A radical group calling themselves the 'New Parliament' has the opinion that Rapa Nui needs a new parliament and has no need for the council of elders or the Chilean government.

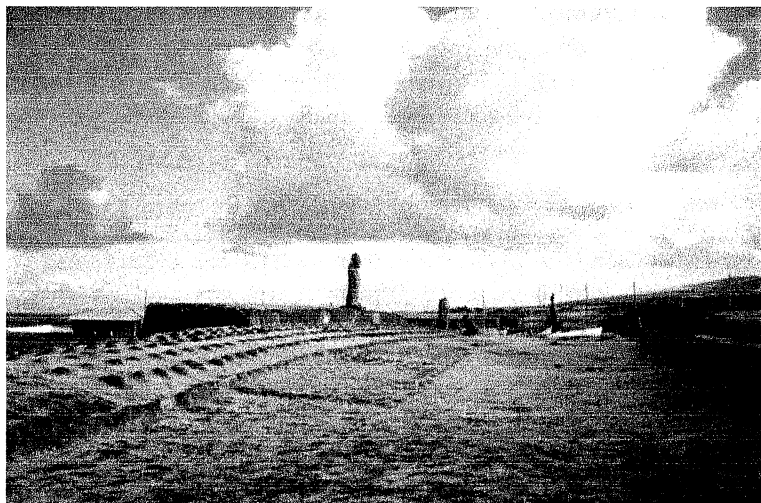
We went by horseback across the island for over a month, trying to find all the landmarks, all the evidence of how the island was divided in earlier times by the tribes. When a



*Figure 9: Ahu O'Kava.*

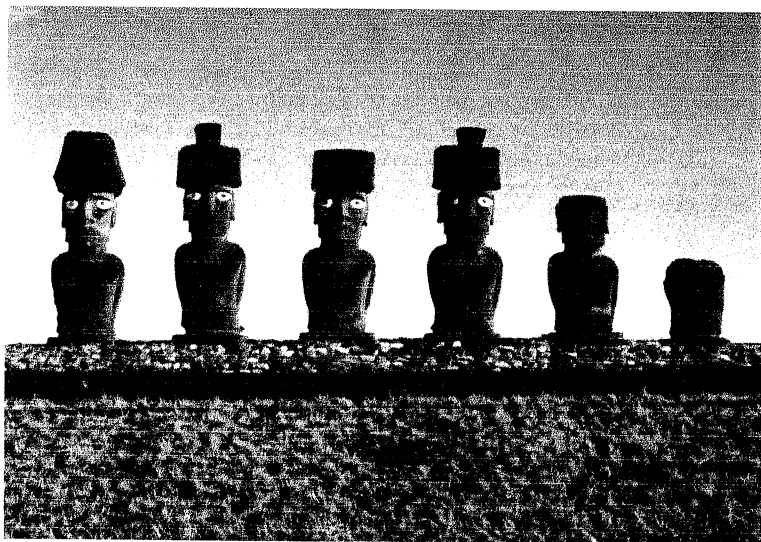


*Figure 12: Ahu Tongariki.*



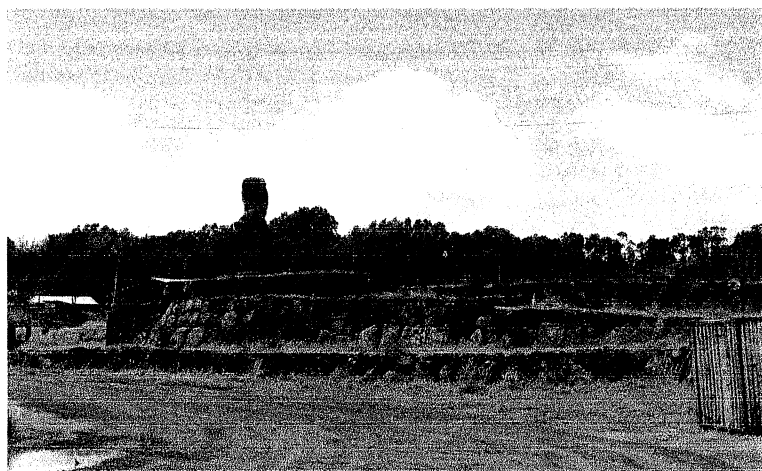
*Figure 10: Ahu Tautira  
(photo P. Wallin).*

*Figure 13: Ahu Hanga Piko.*



*Figure 11: Ahu Nau Nau.*

*Figure 14: Birdman relief and  
a reconstructed base at Orongo.*



Parliament is elected, the leaders will use this map to decide how to distribute the land to the native people... Since Mulloy, it's been like a mafia of archaeologists... All that they call archaeology are not archaeology to us... It's a system of life. They cannot come and say that we can't live here. Now we will have our Parliament, and we are writing our own laws (Trachtman 2002:7).

The Mayor of the island wants the land back, but not to be given to individuals, rather to be managed by the council of elders. He has plans for a new high school, even a university, and a village of knowledge:

'Knowledge is power and power is knowledge... the *moai* are not silent. The *moai* speak...'

He is of the opinion that the world owns the past of Rapa Nui (Trachtman 2002:9).

Finally, this is the voice of a Chilean archaeologist who has worked here for more than 25 years: 'Parts of the national park are being fenced, the land is being cleared using bulldozers or plowed for agriculture. They are destroying archaeological sites!... If you take archaeology out, the island is nothing ... All over the world, people are using the past to recover their identities. The question is, who owns the past? ... As a scientist, with all my deficiencies, I've spent half my life there. It's my island ...' (Trachtman 2002:5-9).

In my view, as one of the outsider archaeologists, I think that the chiefs and *rongorongo* men traditionally controlled the concept of the past through genealogies, myths, legends and rituals. This past probably included all members of society, but it had certain rules tied to it. Only certain people in the society had access to the knowledge of important genealogies, myths and rituals and they were restricted by *tapu* regulations. The destruction of the ceremonial sites in prehistoric times might be interpreted as a revolt against these rules/regulations. The opinions and actions from contemporary Rapanui could possibly be interpreted as a continuous process within the same framework. However, the rebuilding and re-use of the monuments, which occurred in prehistoric times, does not represent an unbroken tradition up to contemporary times. To go and restore archaeological sites may not be the best way to regain and reinforce Rapanui identity today. This might be accomplished through other means such as the arts, writing, performing music and dance, all carried out to a great degree in contemporary Rapanui society (Trachtman 2002:8). Rapanui should to a greater

extent be involved in archaeology and other research concerning their island, but it can be dangerous and chauvinist to try to detach Rapa Nui from the rest of the world. In our globalised world I believe we all have a common responsibility for all the 'pasts'. I agree with the Mayor of Rapa Nui that the Rapanui heritage also belongs to the world, to all humanity, as well as to the Rapanui. Within the framework of World Heritage legislation it can be protected and cared for but opinion and action from the grass roots level is crucial to make this work. If restoration and reconstruction work should be done, I suggest that it be done with greatest care, but I think that the main effort should be put into preservation and careful stabilisation work. According to Ramirez (2001:387-389), there infrastructure and laws exist on Rapa Nui to support a functioning cultural resource management program, but the political will from the Government of Chile and local authorities are essential to make this work. There are no easy solutions and further discussions on the topic are needed.

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