



A • M • E • R • I • C • A • N
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

WILEY

Esoteric Efflorescence in Easter Island

Author(s): Marshall D. Sahlins

Source: *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 57, No. 5 (Oct., 1955), pp. 1045-1052

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/666042>

Accessed: 10-03-2017 16:44 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/666042?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



American Anthropological Association, Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Anthropologist*

REFERENCES CITED

- BRANT, C. S.
 1950 Peyotism among the Kiowa-Apache and neighboring tribes. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6:212-22. Albuquerque.
- DEVEREUX, GEORGE
 1951 Reality and dream; psychotherapy of a Plains Indian. New York, International Universities Press.
- GUNTHER, ERNA
 1950 The westward movement of some Plains traits. *American Anthropologist* 52, No. 2:174-80. Menasha.
- LABARRE, WESTON
 1938 The peyote cult. Yale University Publications in Anthropology, No. 19. New Haven.
- MEAD, MARGARET
 1932 The changing culture of an Indian tribe. Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology XV. New York.
- PETRULLO, VINCENZO
 1934 The diabolic root, a study of peyotism, the new Indian religion among the Delawares. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- RHODES, WILLARD
 1952 Acculturation in North American Indian music. *In* Acculturation in the Americas, ed. Sol Tax, pp. 127-32. Proceedings and Selected Papers from the XXIXth International Congress of Americanists. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

ESOTERIC EFFLORESCENCE IN EASTER ISLAND

The presence of immense stone heads and busts of human form scattered over the barren terrain of Easter Island has confounded European observers for over a century. The statues are all the more mystifying because their exact significance has never been reported and is unknown to the present Polynesian inhabitants of the island. It is our intention here to present a hypothesis in clarification of this so-called "mystery."

The Source of the Statues

Speculation has placed the source of the statues anywhere from Mu to Melanesia. Most such theories have been critically reviewed by Métraux in his comprehensive report on Easter Island culture (1940:412-20). Métraux finds no support for any hypothesis other than that the statues were erected by the Easter Islanders themselves. The fact that since missionary times the natives have not been able to explain the significance of the statues is not perplexing in view of the early disastrous effects of contacts with European slave raiders and diseases—contacts which decimated the population before missionaries arrived (pp. 36ff.). The ignorance of modern Easter Islanders with respect to the meaning of the statues is no more mystifying than their present ignorance of the use of the stone adzes which were the major cutting tools on the island three or four generations ago (p. 306). On the other hand, there exists conclusive evidence that the images are a product of the local culture, a culture which stems from a central-eastern Polynesian source. Archeological remains document the historic unity of Easter Island culture (p. 415). Racially,

the Easter Islanders do not show admixture with other groups. In physical traits the Easter Islanders are allied to Polynesian peoples; the few morphological extremes can be attributed to genetic developments in isolation (Shapiro 1940:24-27). No loanwords have been found in the Easter Island language; all place names are Polynesian (Métraux 1940:415). Recent historical linguistic research shows that the language is genetically related to the eastern variety of Polynesian, and the date of the differentiation of Easter Island language from proto-eastern Polynesian has been set (by glottochronology) at between A.D. 300 and A.D. 530 (Elbert 1953). Traditional native history (Métraux 1940:56ff.) and trait distribution comparisons (Burrows 1938) confirm the cultural-historical position of Easter Island as a relatively early derivative of central-eastern Polynesian culture. The carving of images is itself a central-eastern Polynesian trait, part of the historical tradition of the area (pp. 40-45). Most image carving in east Polynesia is in wood, it is true; but on the other hand, wood suitable for carving was relatively rare in Easter Island (see below).

Although there can be little doubt that the stone images were created by Easter Islanders and that a tradition of image carving was part of their historical background, this local and unique development is not thereby explained. A tremendous amount of human energy was expended in carving the statues and in transporting and erecting them without the wheel or other advanced mechanical aids. Métraux conservatively estimates that some of the statues weigh up to thirty tons (1940:304). Statues were transported long distances from the quarry of Rano-raraku in the southeast. The largest of them were usually erected at the base of the mountain slope quarry, but images of many tons are found on burial terraces far from the quarry. Métraux has attempted to explain why the Easter Islanders invested so much effort in the statues:

The desire for display was certainly a predominant motive for the carving of these giant statues, but it is questionable whether this was sufficient to provoke as much energy as that required for the transportation of enormous statues. On the other hand, to assume that the motive for making the images was entirely religious is to underestimate the tribal pride and competitive instinct of Polynesians [p. 307].

In fairness to Métraux's hypothesis, without knowledge of the exact significance of the statues a comprehensive explanation of this local "cultural efflorescence" is impossible. Undoubtedly the statues had some cultish significance; beyond that one cannot safely speculate. Nevertheless, the explanation proposed by Métraux is inadequate. As all Polynesian groups had ornaments and most if not all had ornamental carvings of some sort, we can assume the "desire to display" to be a constant in Polynesia. The same can be said, as Métraux indicates, for "tribal pride and competitive instinct." Differences between cultures, particularly unique differences, cannot be explained by constants.

In contrast to previous explanations of the images, the hypothesis I wish to propose takes into account the technological and geographical conditions on

Easter Island, the historical background of the culture, and certain features of the socioeconomic organization. The aims of the hypothesis are moderate. It seeks only to establish the cultural and environmental factors which make the great expenditure of labor on this esoteric endeavor intelligible. Without more specific information about the role of the statues in the entire culture than is available, such a question as why heads instead of bodies, or why human images rather than animal, cannot be definitively answered. It will be shown that Easter Island social organization, in common with other social systems of central-eastern Polynesia, was suited to and reinforced by the organization of large amounts of manpower for communal production and specialist or semi-specialist production. It is submitted that, due to unique environmental features of Easter Island, this communal and specialist productive capacity was largely channeled into an esoteric domain rather than into subsistence activities. With these postulates in mind, the social and economic organizations of aboriginal central-eastern Polynesia will be reviewed, followed by a summary of the socioeconomic system and technological-environmental conditions on Easter Island.

Central-Eastern Polynesia

The social organizations of central-eastern Polynesian islands for which we have detailed information—Marquesas, Mangareva, Mangaia, New Zealand, Tahiti, and Hawaii—were all characterized by what Firth has termed “ramages” (see Best 1924; Buck 1934, 1938; Handy 1923, 1930, 1950; Malo 1903; cf. Firth 1936:367–72). Variations occurred from island to island, but the major principles of social structure were identical throughout.

A basic feature of ramified organizations is the organization of kin groups along the lines of a genealogical tree. A ramage is a nonexogamous, internally stratified group of people tracing descent, usually patrilineally, to a common ancestor. A number of ramagees related to each other through descent from a common ancestor (genealogically reckoned) might be combined into a ramage of higher order. An entire society may be merely a “maximal” ramage. Internal stratification is the *sine qua non* of ramage organization. Each ramage, high order or low, has a head who succeeds to this position by primogeniture. A corollary to primogenitural succession is that, in any given group of people descendant from a common ancestor, a senior line can be distinguished from a number of junior lines, each line ranked according to the order of birth of the persons (usually brothers) standing at the apexes of the lines. Every individual in such a group holds a different rank, precisely in proportion to his genealogical distance from the senior line of eldest sons.

The central-eastern Polynesian societies considered here were often single ramified social systems. The sociopolitical unit, which might be an entire island, can usually be diagrammed on one genealogical tree. The paramount chief was the direct descendant in the senior line of the reputed founder of the society. Descendants of younger brothers through younger brothers *ad infinitum* occupied the lowest statuses in the society. Group-wise, the organization was composed of a number of ramagees of differing order of size. The house-

hold, a patrilocal extended family, was invariably the fundamental unit. Higher-order ramage, such as the Maori *hapu* ("clan") and *ivi* ("tribe"), contained a number of households tracing common origin. Higher-order ramage developed through the fissioning of lower-order ramage.

In central-eastern Polynesia, the ramified social system was the framework of economic processes, especially those of distribution and production. Extra-household distributions took two forms: reciprocal exchanges between households, a relatively minor form; and the more spectacular, major form, redistribution. (For a discussion of reciprocal and redistributive forms of distribution, see Polanyi 1944, chap. IV.) In redistributions, surplus production, i.e., food, mats, bark-cloth and other stuffs not immediately consumed by the producers, was periodically collected and passed up the stratified hierarchy of household heads and heads of larger ramage, often up to the paramount chief of the social unit. The paramount chief was the focus of an accumulation system composed of the entire society; lesser chiefs, heads of lesser ramage, were focuses of smaller accumulation systems. Some of the collected goods were retained by chiefs for their own use. Other goods, especially foods, were redistributed among producers on occasions of large religious feasts and ceremonies, life-crisis rites in chiefly families, feasts celebrating intertribal visits and at famine times. Finally, and what is most significant here, a portion of the accumulated goods was used by the chiefs to feed and reward communal laborers and specialists of various types.

The controls exerted by chiefs over communal and specialist production were far-reaching. By virtue of their roles in the redistributive system, the chiefs initiated and supported the great bulk of these types of production; correspondingly, the products of communal and specialist labor were nominally owned by chiefs. The organization of the production itself was ramage organization. Communal labor was carried out by ramage under ramage heads. Mass labor was used in several or all of the following types of work in each locale: house building, large canoe building, irrigation works construction, fishing, bush clearing, fortress construction and temple construction. In societies wherein large amounts of surplus could be produced, as, for example, Hawaii, thousands of men might be involved simultaneously in a single task (Ellis 1825:215). Specialist production was also carried out in a ramage framework. A specialization might be held within a small ramage, the entire group working together under the head, who was a master craftsman (this organization of specialized production is often misleadingly called a "guild"). There were several types of specialists: canoe builders, house builders, master fishers, tattooers, priests, etc. Craftsmen often worked in conjunction with communal labor forces as supervisors.

The regulation of communal and specialist production by chiefs is implied by the chiefs' role in the redistributive system, as such productions necessitate an accompanying distribution of food and other goods to support and reward the workers. In turn, control over these economic processes reinforces the political position of the chiefs, because control over goods necessitates

control over people. The reinforcing aspect of these economic and social differentials is most marked when communal or specialized labor is expended in productivity-increasing, subsistence activities. A large surplus permits a large mobilization of manpower. When this manpower is applied to activities which directly affect the subsistence level, another large surplus, capable of sustaining more labor, is produced. The circular process may continue until the technological, environmental, and political limits are reached.

In summary, central-eastern Polynesian social organization was of the ramage type, an internally stratified organization. The ramage structure was the framework of a redistributive economy. The sociopolitical position of the ramage head was correlated with a pre-eminent position in the regulation of economic processes, especially in the regulation of communal and craft production. These forms of economic, social, and political controls were mutually reinforcing.

Easter Island

The social system of Easter Island was clearly of the ramage type. As the culture of Easter Island was derived from central-eastern Polynesia, it may be assumed that major aspects of social organization were likewise so derived.

The population of Easter Island at contact was between three and four thousand (Métraux 1940:20-22). The society was segmented into ten high-order ramares, *mata* (translated as "tribe" by Métraux). Each *mata* traced patrilineal descent from a common ancestor, often a son or a grandson of the traditional original settler of the island. One *mata*, the Miru, claimed direct descent in the senior line from the original settler, and supplied the paramount sacred chief of the island, the *ariki-mau*. Members of the Miru were called "chiefly men" (*ariki-papa*) and were accorded special esteem. *Mata* were segmented into ramares of lower order ("lineages"), composed of a number of households tracing common descent from a near relative of the common *mata* ancestor. The principle of seniority pervaded the entire society. Barring personality defects, primogeniture was the usual rule of succession to positions of authority.

The predominant method of extrahousehold distribution was redistribution. Details are often lacking because of the badly disrupted nature of the culture at the time of scientific study. Several types of feasts are described which involved food redistribution by high ranking men (pp. 333ff.). For example, an annual feast was attended by people "from all over the island" who had come to hear priest-chanters "read" the famous Easter Island script (pp. 390-91). The food for this feast was supplied by the *ariki-mau*, "who was aided by the people of neighboring districts" (p. 390). Although information is not conclusive, it is apparent that ramage heads, through control of surplus produce, controlled also communal and specialist production. Métraux reports, for example, "Tepano told me that expert stone carvers . . . received orders from people who wanted a monument for their *ahu*. They worked under the leadership of a master . . . and were paid in fish, lobsters and eels" (p. 137).

As *ahu* were lineage burial terraces, it may be inferred that the lineage head gave the "order."

The socioeconomic system in Easter Island is identical in principle to that system which predominated in central-eastern Polynesia, whence Easter Island culture derived. The first migrants to Easter Island arrived with an organization, political, social and economic, of which communal labor and specialist production were integral aspects. But the original immigrants encountered an environment in Easter Island that was peculiar in many ways when compared to central-eastern Polynesian islands. With the technology at hand, the environmental conditions largely precluded the use of communal or specialist labor in production which directly affected subsistence, and fostered the use of communal and specialist labor in such esoteric pursuits as erecting stone images.

The subsistence base of Easter Island culture was similar to that found on all Polynesian high islands. There was a marked dependence on horticulture; sweet potato, banana, yam, and taro were the major crops. Fishing was a secondary activity. However, variations in the typical Polynesian subsistence techniques were occasioned by the geography of Easter Island. These variations are of crucial importance for understanding the canalization of mass and specialist labor into stone image building. Outstanding among the peculiarities of the local environment are: porous soil, lack of streams or rivers, very limited wood resources, and the absence of reefs, especially of a barrier reef and its accompanying lagoon (pp. 7-19, *passim*; Skottsberg 1920).

Rainfall on Easter Island is limited to about 50 inches per annum. The volcanic soil is, in addition, very porous. Porosity of soil and limited rainfall result in the absence of rivers. Furthermore, forests are almost completely absent; the predominant cover in aboriginal times was grass. Without rivers or streams, irrigation is impossible; hence, the utilization of manpower on a large scale for waterworks construction, such as occurred in Hawaii, Rarotonga, and probably Tahiti, was ruled out in Easter Island. (As late as the 1880's one irrigation ditch built under Hawaiian aegis involved the use of seven hundred men [Perry 1913:94].) The absence of forests obviated problems of bush clearing in Easter Island. In such places as New Zealand, for example, the labor force of an entire village—a village contained at least several hundred people—might be mobilized for community forest clearing and planting (Best 1924, II:377, 401-2; 1925:*passim*). Furthermore, the shortage of wood placed strict limits on the amount of canoe building in Easter Island and on the size of canoes. None of the large Polynesian double canoes were built. Not only was the development of canoe-building specialists thereby limited, but also the development of communal canoe building. By contrast, in islands where wood was abundant, such as the Marquesas, as many as four hundred men (possibly a somewhat exaggerated figure) might be engaged in the construction of a large canoe (Linton 1923:302). Fortress building, usually involving wood constructions in Polynesia, was also restricted by the paucity of the wood supply in Easter Island. This same lack of wood and the absence of a barrier reef and lagoon in Easter Island combined to restrict the size and

frequency of communal fishing expeditions. Deep-sea fishing in large organized canoe fleets, a common Polynesian phenomenon, was precluded. Without a lagoon, many types of large-scale communal netting operations were also impossible. Again, in contrast, co-operative lagoon fishing with nets and sweeps up to 500 feet long are reported for Mangareva (Buck 1938:297), up to one mile long for Tubuai in the Rapa group (Aitken 1930:59). Some communal shore fishing did occur on Easter Island, but it was comparatively infrequent and small in scope. A net of 75 feet in length used for fishing of this type has been preserved in the U. S. National Museum. (Geisler reported seeing a net 200 feet long, but Métraux considers the size exaggerated [1940:187].)

The environmental conditions of Easter Island have thus severely restricted the domain of communal production. Outside of the construction and transportation of the stone images, there were few communal undertakings. Some large guest houses were built, undoubtedly by mass labor (p. 201). Wells, reservoirs, burial terraces and sea walls, all built on or near the coast, may also have been communally constructed. But it is the statues, some weighing up to thirty tons and some transported many miles across the island, that represent the greatest investment of mass energy in Easter Island culture. The methods of transport and erection of the images are not known. Métraux opines that the statues were, "probably hauled a bit at a time, possibly by a whole tribe working together as in the Marquesas" (p. 305).

Specializations were also largely restricted to esoteric endeavors. Outstanding were priests of various types, including the famous *rongorongo* men who read the Easter Island script and chanted genealogies. According to Métraux, special schools were set up for teaching these skills (p. 137). Other craftsmen were the wood carvers and the stone carvers. The latter made the stone images. According to Métraux, they were "organized into a sort of guild" (p. 137).

Geographical factors can be definitely seen to have inhibited the development of many sorts of communal and specialist production on Easter Island despite the fact that the social organization was adapted to these types of production. It is, therefore, not surprising that a great amount of manpower was used in stone image construction.

Summary and Conclusions

The evidence from historical and ethnographic sources suggests the following interpretation of the development of Easter Island stone images. The earliest Easter Islanders arrived from the central Polynesian hearth with a ramage organization and a tradition of image carving. The organization was suited to and reinforced by communal labor and specialized production. Environmental features of the new home largely precluded the use of communal and specialist labor in subsistence production. As a result, these efforts were channeled into an esoteric domain of culture. Perhaps facilitated by a tradition of carving, a limited amount of wood and the availability of easily worked tuff, the canalization toward esoteric production took the particular direction that resulted in the renowned stone heads of Easter Island.

MARSHALL D. SAHLINS, *Columbia University*

REFERENCES CITED

- AITKEN, ROBERT T.
1930 *Ethnology of Tubuai*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 70. Honolulu.
- BEST, ELSDON
1924 *The Maori*. 2 vols. *Memoirs of the Polynesian Society* 5. Wellington.
1925 *Maori agriculture*. *Dominican Museum Bulletin* 9. Wellington.
- BUCK, SIR PETER H. (TE RANGI HIROA)
1934 *Mangaian society*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 122. Honolulu.
1938 *Ethnology of Mangareva*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 157. Honolulu.
- BURROWS, EDWIN G.
1938 *Western Polynesia*. *Ethnologiska Studier* 7. Goteborg.
- ELBERT, SAMUEL H.
1953 *Internal relationship of Polynesian languages and dialects*. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 9:147-73.
- ELLIS, WILLIAM E.
1825 *Journal of a tour around Hawaii*. Boston, Crocker and Brewster.
- FIRTH, RAYMOND
1936 *We the Tikopia*. London, Allen and Unwin.
- HANDY, E. S. C.
1923 *The native culture in the Marquesas*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 9. Honolulu.
1930 *History and culture in the Society Islands*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 79. Honolulu.
1950 *The Hawaiian family system*. *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 59:170-90.
- LINTON, RALPH
1923 *The material culture of the Marquesas Islands*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Memoir Vol. 8, No. 5. Honolulu.
- MALO, DAVID
1903 *Hawaiian antiquities*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Special Publication 2. Honolulu.
- MÉTRAUX, ALFRED
1940 *Ethnology of Easter Island*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 160. Honolulu.
- PERRY, ANTONIO
1913 *Hawaiian water rights*. *Hawaiian Annual* 39:90-99.
- POLANYI, KARL
1944 *The great transformation*. New York, Farrar and Rinehart.
- SHAPIRO, HARRY L.
1940 *The physical relationships of the Easter Islanders*. In *Ethnology of Easter Island*, by Alfred Métraux. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 160. Honolulu.
- SKOTTSBERG, CARL
1920 *The natural history of Juan Fernandez and Easter Island*. Vol. 1, No. 1. Uppsala.