

Grant McCall. *Rapanui: Tradition and Survival on Easter Island*. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii. 1981. Pp. 197, illustrations, maps, notes. \$16.95.

Following the inauguration of air travel to Easter Island in the late 1960s, the sudden ease of access to this remote bit of land resulted in a veritable spate of publications on this so-called island of mystery. While a few were of the stolid, monographic stuff of archaeologists, the majority were aimed at a public whose curiosity about the island and its giant statues had been aroused by Thor Heyerdahl's best selling popular book, *Aku Aku*, published in 1958. Now comes yet another popular book, but with a difference. This one is written by a professional anthropologist who spent eighteen months living with the Rapanui, as the islanders now call themselves. His concern is not with the numerous archaeological remains on the island, but rather with the people who left them, and whose descendants have survived the onslaught of European and Euro-American culture contact, and yet who have continued to maintain their own sense of identity. Thus, as he explains, his narrative has to do with the "development and current situation of the Easter Islanders."

To understand the development of a people who left no written record one must, per force, turn first to the archaeological record, then to the ethnohistoric accounts, and, finally, to the living people themselves. As it turns out, the author's real knowledge and interest lies with the living Easter Islanders, and his last seven chapters, two-thirds of the book, deal with this subject in a sound and delightful manner. Unfortunately, in these days of anthropological specialization, it is difficult to be all things to all reviewers, and this reviewer, steeped in archaeology and ethnohistory, found him somewhat lacking in his opening three chapters dealing with the prehistory and history of the island.

The author, no archaeologist, attempts to discuss the prehistoric aspect of Rapanui development with rather dubious success. Perhaps it is these first two chapters that the author, Grant McCall, is referring to on page 10 when he states that, "In order to tell this story, I have simplified the normally cautious approach of the scholar and indulged in speculation." Unfortunately for the reader, he seldom labels his speculations as such. However, as a gesture to those of us who might question his reasoning, he has included "summary references, grouped at the end of the book by chapters," where the evidence turns out to be nothing more than a series of works on Easter Island, all of which the reader is apparently expected to pour through in search of his answers, no specific page or chapter references have been included.

A few of these apparent speculations on the prehistoric past are worth mentioning as examples. Thus, the effects of the Little Ice Age, well documented in medieval Europe but not yet known in lower latitudes, is seen as probably having had dire consequences in Polynesia. For unexplained reasons this cooler period is thought to have changed the "calm and placid" waters of Polynesia into cold and rough seas which effectively stopped the previous long-ranging voyages that Polynesians are thought to have made. Later in the book McCall sees this same cooling trend as responsible for food shortages on Easter Island. This, in turn, he sees as resulting in warfare, cannibalism, and a sudden fundamental change in the islanders' religion. The more plausible suggestion that over-population may have caused the food shortage is barely touched upon.

While there is some evidence for the island having once been divided into two major groups of people, it is sheer speculation on his part that the northern group were prehistoric fisher-folk because of poor soil, and the southern group agriculturalists. Agriculture was certainly practiced in early historic times on the north coast since Beechy, sailing around the northern periphery of the island in 1825, reports seeing terraced agricultural fields. Again, in 1955, I personally discovered some remains of Terevaka volcano. Also, just why the southern agriculturalists should have to supply the northern fisher-folk with wood for their canoes, as the author claims, when Terevaka, well within the northern group's boundary, must have been covered with such timber, is a little hard to understand.

McCall's suggestion that there was a sudden prehistoric island-wide shift from worshipping giant stone figures of ancestors to a newly-created god named *Make Make*, as well as the creation of a new sacred bird cult ceremony centered at Orongo, does have a certain amount of supportive evidence. There is no doubt that the carving of the great statues ceased rather abruptly, but exactly when is not certain. It is also true that the archaeological remains at the pan-ceremonial site of Orongo are relatively late. Whether the cessation of statue carving predates the construction of Orongo remains to be determined. Regardless, considering the usually conservative nature of religious beliefs, it is difficult to conceive of a totally isolated culture (which McCall feels was the case) suddenly doing away with its traditional religious concepts and inventing a new god and a totally new bird cult. Gods, ancestor worship, and sacred birds linked to deity are found together elsewhere in Polynesia, Tahiti being one example. Thus, presuming no outside contact after initial settlement, a more plausible concept would be that all three elements arrived with the first settlers, and the religious change represented one of emphasis rather than of innovation.

The author, having warned his readers that he would offer speculations, can be forgiven for an over-imaginative mind. However, he certainly must be faulted for a few inaccuracies of factual knowledge.

On page 33, he refers to the stone forming the statue quarry of Rana Raraku as being composed of "dense basalt." Nothing could be farther from the truth, since the material is a relatively soft volcanic tuff, or consolidated ash, which can easily be scratched with a knife. Perhaps more understandably, McCall refers to the black slabs of stone used in the construction of the Orongo houses as being of slate. Actually, they are of volcanic basalt. Finally, had he read the report on my excavations at Orongo in 1955-56, he would not have stated, as he does on page 40, that the houses were "erected over a natural depression." Quite the contrary, their floors were excavated into the sloping ground, the spoil heaps from such digging having been clearly evident behind several of the dwellings.

While Chapter 2 on the prehistory of the island comes off as a somewhat speculative piece of writing, McCall begins to warm up to his subject in the following chapter on the history of Easter Island. For some unexplained reason, his historical account closes with the annexation of Easter Island by Chile in 1888, the history of that country's occupation not being dealt with until Chapters 7 and 8. While the historical treatment of foreign contact and intervention on the island are interestingly written from an historian's point of view, it is a little surprising that an anthropologist concerned with the development of the Rapanui did not take the opportunity to review the ethnohistoric information contained in the documents of the time. In fact, after reading McCall's descriptions of modern Rapanui, and comparing these with my own limited ethnographic observations made during the Norwegian expedition in 1955-56, I am amazed at the degree of culture change and adaptation that has taken place during only the last twenty-five years. However, ethnohistoric documents of the Pacific may not be McCall's strong point for on page 52 he mistakenly has the Society Islander, Omai, being taken back to England on Cook's first voyage when, in fact, it was the second voyage.

While the first three chapters of this book leave something to be desired, it is a pleasure to commend the remaining seven chapters. Here McCall is very much at home dealing with the modern Easter Islanders, and it shows in his writing. It is almost as if he had happily written the original manuscript starting with Chapter 4, had later felt compelled to write the first three introductory chapters, and did so under duress.

The concept of family and household, as the Rapanui presently see it, is an all important subject which requires two full chapters of clearly written prose. This is as it should be since McCall sees the Easter Island

view of family as the one traditional concept that gives the Rapanui their sense of identity. In doing so it has also served as a survival mechanism over the years of foreign cultural impingement. While a few ceremonies which I recorded back in 1955 appear to have been discontinued, or at least are not mentioned, it is interesting to note that the belief in spirits and dreams has been maintained, in spite of the continued presence of the Catholic church.

McCall's vivid description of the material benefits that have now accrued to the islanders is in sharp contrast to the limited availability of such items twenty-five years ago. Of more significance, is the change over this same period of time from a basically trade and exchange economy in 1955 to the full-blown cash economy so clearly described by the author. However, he is amply appreciative of the effects of the more recent advanced education and travel that has now become a part of the Rapanui way of life. The discussions of these aspects exhibit a real sense of depth and clarity. In addition to these insightful studies of the modern Rapanui, the author offers a thoughtful fringe benefit to the reader unfamiliar with the range of lifeways of mankind. Thus, at the beginning of these chapters he discusses the broader aspects of the subject about to be examined.

All in all, the greater part of this book is a clearly and delightfully written volume about the modern Easter Islanders and how they survive under existing circumstances.

Edwin N. Ferdon, Jr.
Arizona State Museum
The University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona