

Rapanui Placenames: Keys to the Mysteries

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A number of placenames are investigated which shed light upon the culture of Easter Island.

Easter Island (Rapa Nui), “the center of the world” according to the local views, keeps many secrets. Placenames are important sources that can help to decode the mysterious culture of this island (Rjabchikov 1993a; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1997a; 1997b). This report deals with several placenames which are key ones for understanding Rapanui ethnology. It is necessary to keep in mind the rules of the gradual phonetic evolution of the Polynesian languages in order to read some of the names successfully.

The Rapanui Creation Chant contains the name *Tiki-te-Hatu* ‘Tiki-the lord’, associated with Tiki, the first man or the god creator in central and marginal Polynesia (Métraux 1940, 321, 323). This god in the ancient New Zealand religion is regarded as the deity *Tane*’s creative power, and *Tane* is a personified form of the sun (Buck 1938, 265; Best 1955, 16). So one can suppose that the Rapanui placename *Hatu o puna* (Barthel 1962, 105) is connected with this religious idea. Indeed, the ghost *Puna* is mentioned in a myth (Métraux 1940, 312-313). *Puna* was always looking at the priestess and she was watching over the skull, an incarnation of the god creator *Makemake* (*Tiki, Tane, Tangaroa.*) The name *Puna* is also included in the four placenames *Ahu puna hoa*, *Ahu puna kape*, *Ahu puna poho*, and *Ahu puna rere takatea* (Barthel 1962, 104). Rapanui *ahu* signifies ‘ceremonial platform’, *hoa* is ‘friend’, *kope* is ‘son’, ‘young person’; Maori *poha* is ‘youngest child of a family’ or

'full', *rere* is 'to rise or to set, as heavenly bodies'; Rapanui *rere* is 'to fly', *taka* is 'round', 'bright red', *takataka* is 'sphere', 'round', *tea* is 'white', and *takatea* is 'semen'. Obviously these terms describe the solar cult.

The ceremonial platform, *Ahu puna hoa*, is described by Thomson: "although in ruins, this has evidently been a structure of some importance; 175 feet long..." (1891, 505). Near this platform American investigators found a peculiar stone buried in the earth. The natives called this nearly spherical stone *Petakula*. I believe that it was a symbol of the sun. The name *Petakula* consists of *peta* (Rapanui *pata* 'clot of blood') and *kura* (Rapanui *kurakura* 'fair, light'; Tuamotuan *kurakura* 'red'). The wordplay is quite possible: Rapanui *tiko* 'menstruation', *Tiki* 'the sun deity', *katiki* 'the solar corona', *komari* 'vulva'; and Maori *komaru* 'the sun'.

Interestingly, the name of the main statue on Easter Island, *Hoa-haka-nana-ia*, also contains the word *hoa* 'friend', and the petroglyph of the sun is depicted on its back (Rjabchikov 1993b). Additionally, the name of the god,¹ *Rarai-a-Hoa*, is literally 'the sun-friend'. The placename *Ara horenga* (Barthel 1962, 105) denotes 'The road of the yellow friend (the sun)'; i.e., 'the ecliptic'. The placename *Toka mitiake* (Barthel 1962, 107) signifies 'the sun' (lit. 'the sphere² of the great dryness').

As has been shown (Rjabchikov 1997a), the placename *Ahu tahai* is a reflex of solar worship as well. The placename *Ra tahai* (Barthel 1962, 107) includes the term *ra* (*ra'a*) 'the sun'. Moreover, in accordance with Rapanui legends (Barthel 1978, 2-4), *Ratavake* was an initial settler of Easter Island; he lived at Mataveri, also connected with the solar cult (Rjabchikov 1996a). Therefore it is natural to divide the hero's name into *ra* (*ra'a*) 'the sun' and *tavake* 'tropic bird'. I think that it is a hint at the birdman Makemake's cult since this god is represented on rock drawings as a person with the head of a frigate bird (Métraux 1940).

The placename *Te kana haure* correlates with Tuamotuan *kana* 'bright', 'gleaming' (Barthel 1978, 174). I believe that *haure* is comparable to Tahitian *hau* 'king' and Rapanui *ree* 'victor'. Indeed, Makemake was the deity of warriors (Lee 1992). Glyph 49 of the Easter Island writing system³ with the standard reading (*ariki*) *mau* 'supreme

chief, king' has the variant 49b, which consists of glyphs 14 *hau* and 41 (*e*)*re*. Also the term *kana* is like Rapanui *kena* 'booby bird', and as indicated above, the bird cult is united with the solar cult.

Both the placenames *Uimahara* and *Te uirenga* (Barthel 1962, 107) contain Rapanui *ui* 'to look'. The term *mahara* can be compared with Maori *mahora* 'exposed to view', spread out' and is mentioned in the Maori expression *He mata mahora no te ara whanui a Tane*, which describes the sun deity Tane (Best 1954, 19). Again, *renga* 'yellow' has the figurative meaning of 'sun'. On the strength of these examples the name of the sun deity *Maui* (Best 1954, 33) can be interpreted as *Ma-ui* where *ma* corresponds to Maori *ma* 'white, clean' and *whakama* 'to make white'.⁴

The map of Easter Island by W.J. Thomson (1891) contains two ancient placenames. The first, *Ko Tatake* M[ountain] has been replaced by the name *Tangaroa* on modern maps. It should be pointed out that both names have similar meanings: Rapanui *take* signifies 'initiation', Maori *take* 'chief', Rapanui *taka* 'round', 'bright red', *takataka* 'sphere', 'round', and this complex is due to the sun god Makemake/Tane/Tiki/Tangaroa (Rjabchikov 1997c). The second, the placename *Rana Hana Kana* presented on Thomson's map is replaced by the name *Tere (a) Vaka* on modern maps. My research (Rjabchikov 1996b, 255-6), shows that this place (lit. 'The boat goes away') is named for the boat of the sun god and the moon goddess. In addition, Rapanui *rano* means 'volcano'; Tuamotuan *hana* means 'the sun'; Rapanui *hana* means 'heat' and Tuamotuan *kana* means 'bright' or 'gleaming'.

The ancient Easter Islanders decorated their chicken houses with the signs of *rei-miro* pendants, and these ornaments are symbols which promote fertility (Barthel 1978). This custom is reflected in the placename *Puku ure pu rei* (Barthel 1962, 107): the term *rei* compares with Rapanui *rei-miro* 'pendant in the form of a canoe', *pu* means 'to produce', *ure* means 'penis', and *puku* means 'hill'. It is well to bear in mind that hieroglyph 8 represents the pendant *rei-miro* and reads *matua* 'hull of canoe', 'parent'. Additionally, the corresponding Hawaiian string figure,⁵ also representing a canoe, is called *hapua-kane* 'male child' or *hapua-wahine* 'female child'. Furthermore, *hapu* signifies 'pregnant' in both Maori and Tahitian.

Notes

1. Perhaps an image of this god is seen in the statue *Hoa-haka-nana-ia*.
2. Cf. also Rapanui *toka* 'flat stone'.
3. I use my own classification and translation scheme for reading the rongorongo glyphs (Rjabchikov 1987).
4. In a like manner, I split Maori *uira* 'gleam', 'flash' into *ui* and *ra* (cf. Maori *ra* 'the sun').
5. See Rjabchikov (1997b, 48 table).

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