

# Three Mysteries of Easter Island

*In which the symbols of the enigmatic Polynesian culture are investigated by the methods of the modern psychologist*

by Werner Wolff

ON the morning of Easter Sunday in 1722, the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen landed on an uncharted, thickly populated island in the Pacific 2,000 miles due west of the Chilean coast and 1,100 miles southeast of Pitcairn, the nearest inhabited island. Roggeveen called his discovery Easter Island. He found a lava-covered strip of land 13 miles long and seven miles across at its widest point, practically destitute of vegetation, hemmed in by extinct volcanoes and precipitous cliffs 1,000 feet high, and covered with a weird profusion of ancient human relics which ever since have remained one of the principal puzzles of anthropology.

The most spectacular of Easter Island's mysteries is the multitude of gigantic stone statues, 30 feet tall and weighing 50 tons or more, which lie scattered over the island like seeds tossed at random from some giant's hand. The meaning of these statues with long ears and shapeless bodies is itself an enigma. Even more baffling is the question of how the massive objects were moved from the volcano crater, where they appear to have been manufactured, to the various sites, some of them atop high cliffs, where they were found.

Decade after decade even more intriguing material has been uncovered on Easter Island—by W. J. Thomson leading an American expedition in 1886, by Mrs. Scoresby Routledge of a British expedition in 1914-16, and by A. Metraux and H. Lavachery of a French expedition in 1934. They found wooden tablets with hieroglyphics that have never been satisfactorily deciphered, carvings in rock of creatures half bird and half man, wooden idols 20 to 30 inches high.

The three basic questions posed by these strange relics are: What was the origin of the Easter Islanders and their

culture? What is the meaning of their hieroglyphics and symbols? What is the answer to the enigma of the statues?

To these questions I have attempted to apply a new approach—a psychological culture-analysis suggested by the methods used in the psychological investigation of individuals. The essence of this approach is a search for the natives' associations with each symbol, and an attempt to find in these associations common denominators that may reveal the Easter Islanders' view of life and the world. For instance, the form and size of the Easter Island statues cannot be considered accidental. The statues must be interpreted as symbols in a larger context; they are like images in a dream which must be analyzed in relation to other associations.

In attacking the problem of deciphering the Easter Islanders' symbols we are assisted by a net of relationships among the natives' chants, ceremonies and inscriptions, and the similarity of their language to others. We have much comparative data from other Polynesian islands, with which Easter Island apparently had a cultural connection, and, as we shall see, there are similarities to more distant cultures.

The wooden script tablets on Easter Island are called *kohau rongo-rongo*, generally translated as "singing wood." They were supposedly brought to the island by a king named Hoatumatua, probably around 800 A.D. The natives tell of an ancient yearly ceremony performed by singers called *rongo-rongo* men. Wearing feather headdresses, they sat in rows facing the king and chanted the text of the tablets.

In this ceremony we find a common denominator in the feather headdresses of the singers and the added fact that each singer received from the king a



**FAMOUS MYSTERY** of Easter Island is the great stone heads scattered on the slope of the volcano



Rano Raraku. Many of the heads are unfinished; some lie in the places where they were quarried. How they were transported to their various locations is not clear, although the author offers a theory. An island legend relates that a group known as the Short-Ears made the heads to commemorate a group they had massacred.



**ROCK CARVINGS** of Easter Island were one source of the symbols interpreted by psychologist Wolff. When the meaning of the island's hieroglyphics (*below*) had

been deciphered, they could be compared with other symbols. This process illuminated some of the motives that impelled curious cultural behavior of the islanders.



**HIEROGLYPHICS** of Easter Island have some similarities to the Egyptian. First attempt to translate a tablet bearing them failed because a native interpreter deliber-

ately distorted its meaning. The interpreter, however, composed a dictionary that was perfectly clear. This was successfully used by the author to decipher the tablets.



chicken. The symbol of a bird is further expressed in an annual spring egg hunt around one of Easter Island's volcanoes, in which the singers took part. The finder of the new egg received the preceding year's egg, which had been buried inside a gourd in a cranny of the volcano. The hunter, called a bird-child, had hieroglyphics painted on his back similar to those on the backs of the statues and on the wooden tablets. A native interpreter has explained this glyph as a sign for the sun. The hunter also was required to shave his head and paint it red—another symbol for the renewal of the spring sun. All these indications have led us to interpret the ceremony and the chants as a ritual of rebirth.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that the reading ceremony was held near the *ahu* or burial place. The name of the tablets, *kohau rongo-rongo*, itself suggests a relationship to death, for *kohau*, wood, also means the shaft of a lance, and a similar word, *kohu*, means shadow or obscurity. Thus the tablets seem to be related to rebirth in the same sense as was the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

**T**HE first attempt to decipher the Easter Island tablets was made by Tepano Jausen, Archbishop of Tahiti, who began the task in 1868. He was assisted by a native interpreter named Metoro Tourara. Metoro informed him that the reading of a tablet started at the bottom from the left, followed the next line from right to left, and proceeded in that serpentine fashion up the tablet. This system, known in several ancient civilizations, is called *boustrophedon* (meaning as one leads the oxen when plowing). It permits the reader to follow the lines without interruption. Metoro interpreted the hieroglyphics on one wooden tablet to provide a dictionary. He also translated the tablet, but the translation completely puzzled Jausen. In publishing it he observed: "One has to resign, there is no sense in it."

I discovered this translation in Paris in my search for documents on Easter Island, and decided to re-examine it from a psychological point of view. It is well known that many primitive peoples are secretive about their tribal traditions and resist efforts of strangers to decipher their writings. I considered the possibility that Metoro may have cleverly misled Jausen. To test this assumption I compared the dictionary of glyphs with Metoro's translation and a photograph of the tablet.

It appeared that Metoro had given the correct meaning of the glyphs in many cases, at least where the meaning could be deduced by a stranger from the form of the symbol. His statement that the tablets were read by the *boustrophedon* method also seemed to be correct, for

the glyphs in successive rows appeared as figure reflections would appear in water, head meeting head. The meanings given by Metoro for the glyphs in the first three rows appeared to be accurate—as far as they went. Yet the chant he translated from the entire tablet certainly did not make sense. Furthermore, it was shorter than it should have been according to the number of glyphs.

A close comparison of the dictionary definitions with the glyphs in the first three rows of the tablet and with Metoro's translation of the chant revealed that he had omitted some of the glyphs, varied the meaning of others, inserted "translations" of others which were not present, and, to crown the deception, had translated only one row of the tablet.

In his dictionary, however, Metoro appears to have given the true meaning of the glyphs. When I used these meanings to translate the first three rows, I obtained three coherent, intelligible chants, which are consistent with concepts in the spoken language of the Easter Islanders. The translation of the first line is:

*He lives in heaven, on earth, land of Hoatumatua, [he] lives, he lives in heaven, on earth. [On] earth, the eldest prince lives [on] a boat. The younger brother, the child, he is gone to heaven, on earth, the land of Hoatumatua, the brilliant. He is gone to heaven, on earth. [On] earth the eldest prince, the brilliant, the father is sitting on his throne. The child is joyous in heaven. The bird flies [over] the earth. Man eats, lives, man is at work, man is at work. The fowl flies [over] the billows, the fowl flies [over] the tilled soil, the fowl flies, lives. The king, man lives, the children. The child [on] earth he has left.*

At first glance the chant appears strange. Compared with the old Egyptian chants, however, it is a model of clarity. If it were translated idiomatically instead of literally, glyph by glyph, its meaning would emerge more clearly. Certain details of the chant are corroborated by legends of the island. One tale relates that Hoatumatua, the first deified ancestor-king, was looked on as the mediator between heaven and earth. The allusion to the boat on which he, the eldest prince, is living seems to refer to Hoatumatua's arrival on the island by boat.

**T**HE next question that arises is: What common elements can be found in the tablets and the statues?

Clues to the meaning of the statues may be sought in the folklore and customs of the islanders. Most of the statues, which were carved from lava stone, were found in and around the crater of the largest volcano on the island. Their position, and the distinctive long ears that characterize the figures, may be ex-

plained by an island legend. The legend says that from the first immigrants to the island there descended two tribes: the "Short-Ears," descended from Hoatumatua, and the "Long-Ears," from Machaa, his younger brother. After a time the Long-Ears became clannish and settled on the top of the volcano, where the workshop for carving the statues was located. They ruled the Short-Ears for a while, but after one of their number killed and ate 30 boys of the Short-Ears, the Short-Ears slew all the Long-Ears and took over the workshop of their former masters.

Thus the statues may commemorate the long-eared ancestors. But why were these ancestors idolized as statues after they had been murdered as enemies? According to all observers, the natives on Easter Island believed themselves to be constantly under the influence of the spirits of departed souls. The fear of death was always present. The statues' position at the burial place connects the ancestors with the concept of death. The natives' fear that the murdered clan might take revenge on them might have induced them to construct the statues for appeasement.

Some of the statues have carvings of birds on their backs. The natives' name for statues, *moai*, which has never been explained satisfactorily, seems to connect the symbol of the bird with that of the ancestor. *Moa* means bird, and the *i* in *moai* is the common Polynesian root for ancestry. In Polynesia and Central America the souls of the departed often were represented as birds. Bird designs cover the walls of the "Eat-Men-Cave" on Easter Island where cannibalistic feasts were held.

The bird ceremony on Easter Island seems to explain why the bird was selected as a symbol of the departed soul. This ceremony celebrated the arrival of spring. The bird was not only a symbol of the soul but also of the sun, which is depicted as a firebird in ancient religions of the Old and New Worlds. The bird ceremony appears to have been a prayer for revival of the sun and of man's spirit after death.

The idea that life feeds upon death was expressed in Polynesia by the sea bird, symbol of life, which lives on the fish, symbol of the victims of human sacrifices and of death. Life was supposed to be an energy, *mana*, which could be ingested by eating human flesh. The life energy could also be stored in stones, which were particularly good receptacles because of their durability. The Easter Islanders had so-called *mana* stones which were carried as charms in hazardous enterprises. The statues, then, appear to have been repositories of *mana* that was extracted from the victims and offered to the ancestors as a gift of eternal life in appeasement for their murder. In some way the statue was also the

token of the flying bird, whose flight was a symbol of the ever-moving energy of life.

These concepts can be discovered all through Polynesia and Central America. Mexican manuscripts, for example, show that the sun was fed by the life force contained in human hearts, which were offered to the gods on stone pyramids.

Yet the transportation of the statues remains a great riddle. Thomson was "unable to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion as to how the immense statues on the upper tier of the works could be moved to the plain below." Mrs. Routledge found a statue on a natural eminence, one side of which was a sheer cliff and the other a slope as steep as a house roof. Some students of the problem have suggested that the Easter Islanders may have hauled the statues by means of rollers and ropes over old roads that may long since have been obliterated. But some of the figures are on heights to which no roads could have led, and the island has always been lacking in wood or any material from which either rollers or ropes might have been made. Moreover, it is impossible to explain why the statues, made of friable lava stone, did not crumble or break when they were moved. There are other aspects that have bewildered investigators. The statues are strewn about in no particular order. Some lie on their faces and some on their backs. Many are unfinished. One hundred fifty-seven statues are still in the quarries where they were cut, lying "in the least accessible places," as Metraux observed.

Most striking of all is the fact that the work on the statues appears to have stopped abruptly. The sculptors left the images in all stages of construction. They must have left hurriedly, leaving behind some of their tools—stone chisels that resemble paleolithic hand axes found in Europe. It seems likely that their work was interrupted by a sudden eruption of the volcano.

All this suggests that the transportation of the statues was related somehow to volcanic activity. The sculptors may have found a way to use the volcanic forces to move them. This theory is strengthened by the fact that all the statues are partly buried in volcanic ash. Some natives reported, according to Mrs. Routledge, "that the statues were set up to be finished." Thus it seems that the statues may have been carved in the rough in the crater, transported by the volcano's eruption and finished in the places where they fell. Many statues, however, lie there in a broken state. If the hypothesis of volcanic transportation is accepted, it at once becomes possible to account for many of the other mysteries—the location of the workshop in the crater, the scattering of the great 50-ton masses of stone, the strange posi-

tions and helter-skelter disorder in which they were found.

Our theory gets some support from the language, folklore and symbolic system of the natives. The statues were given names that refer to flying birds. One statue has the name *Viri-viri-moa-i-taka*. *Viri-viri* means to roll; *moa* means fowl; *taka* means wheel. The Easter Island legends say that magicians moved the statues by supernatural power (*mana*) and that the statues "walked" from the crater. The natives exhibit one big lava block as the first image that was made. It resembles a great lump of lava ejected by an eruption.

**T**HE stone statues appear to have been a focal element in the natives' conception of the world. The statues were considered to have been born from the volcano, which was regarded as the womb of the earth. The Easter Islanders called the volcanic island itself *Pito Te Henua*, meaning "Navel of the Earth." *Mana*, the energy of life, was assumed to have its source in the flaming volcano, and it carried the statues through the air like flying birds. The most common bird on the island, the tern, actually nested in the crater. Man's life was considered a parallel to the bird's flight over sea and soil. Thus all the data—the tablets, the chants, the statues, the ceremonies—can be woven into a single carpet of images which presents a coherent, consistent explanation of the Easter Islanders' culture.

The key concept of this culture is the concept of death. It is significant that the first immigrants under Hoatumatua came from an island named *Marae-toe-hau*, the literal meaning of which is "The Burial Place." This traditional migration from a "Burial Place" to an island of life, the "Navel of the Earth," was celebrated in many ceremonial acts.

There remains the most interesting question of all: Where did the ancestors of the Easter Islanders originate? Many legends of peoples in the Americas and in Polynesia tell of a Great Migration across the Pacific. When the first missionaries came to Mexico they were impressed by the similarity of pyramids they saw there to those of Egypt. The great 19th-century German explorer Alexander von Humboldt was struck by similarities in the language of Mexico and of ancient European cultures. Art objects typical of Melanesia and Polynesia have been found in Peru, in Chile and in Colorado.

Where do the Easter Islanders stand in this presumed migration? A most important piece of evidence was discovered by Guillaume de Heveszy of France who detected likenesses between the hieroglyphics of Easter Island and an ancient script found in the Indus Valley of India. The Indus script, in turn,

showed similarities to the picture writing of the Babylonians. Because the meaning of the Easter Island glyphs and of the Indus script was unknown, no definite proof of a cultural relationship could be established. But the translation of Easter Island's hieroglyphics now makes possible a direct comparison of these writings with those of other ancient civilizations, a study which led me to the discovery of a close correspondence between the glyphs of Easter Island and of Egypt.

Their symbols are often similar, not only in form but also in meaning. The similarities are so numerous and so detailed, in more than 80 glyphs, that they cannot be explained by chance. And since these similarities also refer to abstract concepts, they cannot be explained by common human experiences. Such concepts as God, good and to write, for instance, are represented by closely similar glyphs in both cultures. Some hieroglyphics similar in form have different meanings in Egypt and Easter Island, but these differences can be explained. For instance, an Easter Island glyph which is translated as *mata no te henua*, "the eyes of the earth," resembles an Egyptian hieroglyphic meaning grain of corn, or seed. "Eyes of the earth" can be explained as the seeds which, upon germinating, symbolize the opening of the eyes of Mother Earth, gazing at the sun.

**M**ANY other symbols, such as the strange combination of sun bird and earth serpent, are found in the languages of Easter Island, Egypt and Mexico, and the symbol of the feather hat in Easter Island, Babylon and Mexico. The swastika, a common sign in all the ancient cultures of the Old World, also appears in a hieroglyphic on an Easter Island tablet and in the signatures of Easter Island's chiefs during the English expedition in 1774. Many other graphic symbols on Easter Island have counterparts in both the Old and the New Worlds. The similarities of form and meaning are not general, but of a most detailed kind, and they run through the whole pattern of the culture.

There is no reason to think that all ancient cultures lived in complete isolation; migrations, great and small, were possible and likely then as now. We know that famine and social motives drove tribes from land to land and that many of the ancient civilizations sent fleets across the oceans. The similarities we have been considering appear to confirm the theory of a cultural migration from the Old World to the New across the Pacific—with Easter Island as a possible bridge between the hemispheres.

---

Werner Wolff is professor of psychology at Bard College and author of the recent book *Island of Death*.





**QUARRY** on Rano Raraku contains several partly finished heads of the same kind found elsewhere on Easter Island. Other heads have been found in strangely in-

accessible parts of the quarries. These and other facts led the author to believe that the location of the heads is in some way connected with volcanic activity.