

# ANCESTOR WORSHIP ON EASTER ISLAND

by

Dr Josephine Huppertz , *Sankt Augustin , Germany*

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## Introduction

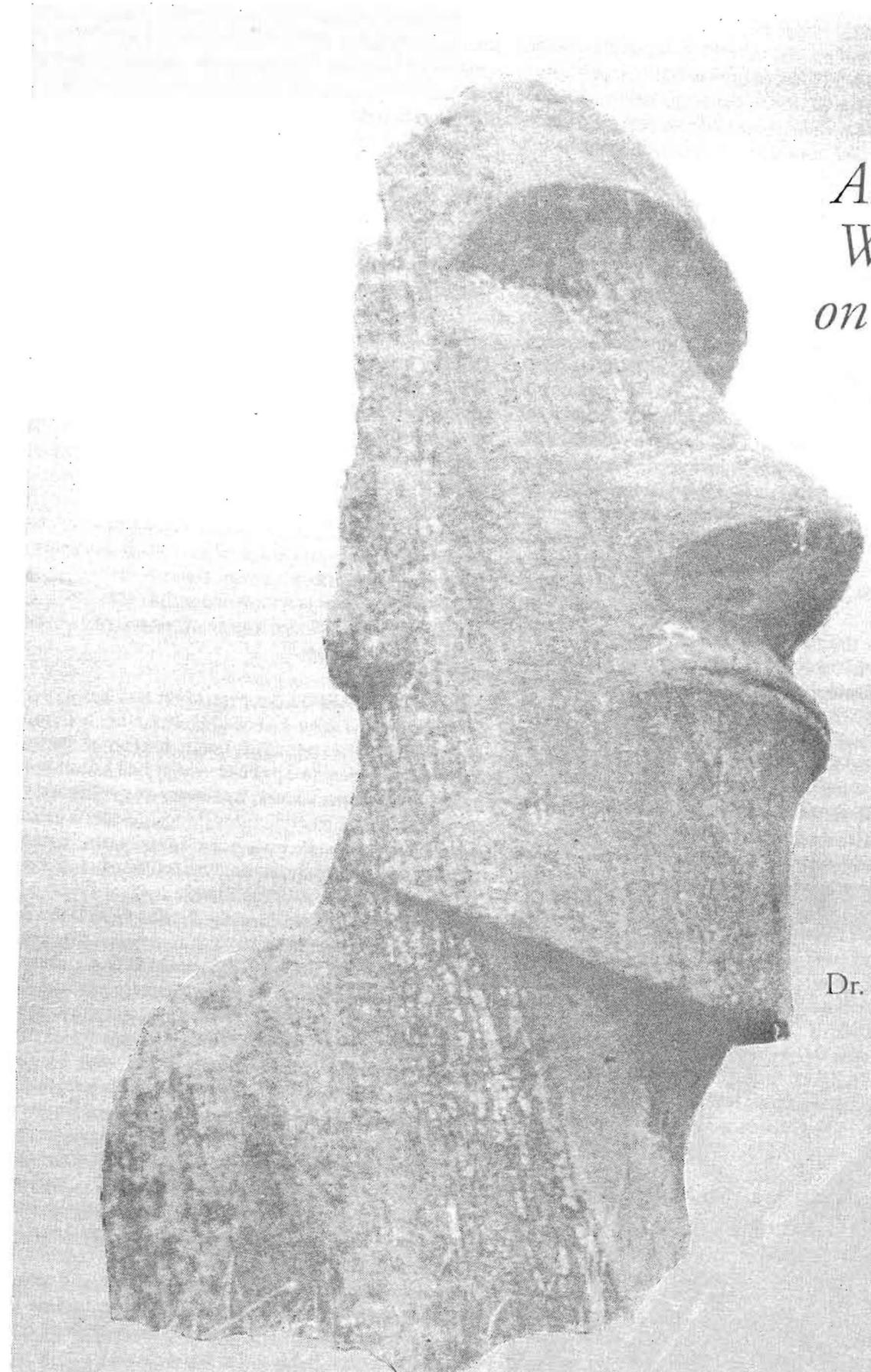
The results of my research on the cult of the dead in Kambot on the River Keram, a right-hand tributary of the lower Sepik in Papua-New Guinea, confirmed me in the assumption that the huge stone monuments on Easter Island must be sculptures in honour of famous ancestors of the previous inhabitants of the village. From the photographs available to me I was not, however, able to tell whether these stone figures faced the sea or the land so I went to Easter Island in 1988 and found the stone ancestors, both on the coast and farther inland, looking towards the respective now empty village squares. This is what I had expected.

## Ancestor worship

In Oceania the Creator of the World was felt to be a good spirit who did not demand sacrifices. However, after he left the earth, the world was filled with spirit beings who could harm mankind. These are feared and people seek to appease them with sacrifices. Such spirit beings can be the dead who live on in their villages and are separated from the living practically only by an invisible wall. As ancestors they enjoy special veneration. However, their power is felt only within the domain of their descendants' settlement whereas in the neighbouring village other spirits hold sway who are feared by the stranger. Furthermore, the spirit of a slain enemy who had been very powerful during his lifetime also had to be appeased with sacrifices so that he would – like a slave – place his undiminished strength at the disposal of his vanquishers since otherwise fear of his vengeance would have filled everyone with terror.

It is not surprising that the spirits of the dead have always occupied man. Belief in life after death led – and continues to lead – to some form of commemoration of these spirit beings. And the memory of the dead is cherished worldwide by their descendants as long as there are any.

The memorials to the dead that have been passed down to us from the early history of mankind allow us a brief insight into what life was like in those times. Yet much is still unexplained since people's beliefs were not always handed down or are preserved only fragmentarily. This is why on Easter Island, too, the burial platforms (*ahu*) and the statues surmounting them (*moai*) which filled both locals and visitors with amazement remain largely unexplained. Outward features such as size and weight were admired, but the meaning of the whole thing seemed inexplicable. Yet these are appar-



*Ancestor  
Worship  
on Easter  
Island*

Dr. J. Huppertz

Translated by Susan Johnson (Eichstätt)



*Rear view of the Naunau ahu. It faces Anakena Bay. In the background two bird petroglyphs are to be seen.*

ently monuments to the dead erected at the burial site in the village square. However, they do not commemorate just any deceased persons but rather only the great men of the settlement who had achieved great fame either through their lineage or else through their heroic deeds.

It is not now possible to establish whether these statues of the great members of a settlement were commissioned by them personally or by their descendants. All the same, standing in the quarry on the edge of the crater of Mt. Rano-raraku from which the stone for the statues was cut, one cannot help gaining the impression that many of the clients vied with one another as to the monumental proportions of their statues. The roads along which the completed statues were transported to their village squares are even today scattered with stone figures left lying along the way.

Thor Heyerdahl learnt that the *moai* statues were transported upright from Mt. Rano-raraku to their destined village squares, thus seeming to walk there by themselves.

From as early as the 17th century there are stories of bloody intertribal fighting on Easter Island. However, in about 1860 at the latest, the carrying off of many men, the king and his heir by slave traders led to the catastrophe which marked the end of the old culture.

Easter Island was first settled in ca. 400 A.D.. At least one further wave of immigration took place between 1300 and 1400. During this period the legendary Hotu-matua landed in Anakena Bay, where the Ature-huki *ahu* restored by the Norwegian expedition led by Thor Heyerdahl bears witness to its being an ancient settlement site. Nearby, slightly farther inland, the mighty Naunau *ahu* rises up with its seven statues, only four of which are still wearing headgear, that is, the incomparable red mark of rank in the form of a tall cylindrical hat weighing tons that shows them to be the great and powerful of the village square. Even during their lifetime they were only allowed to wear special headgear (*pukao*). The stone badge of rank which they bear on their monuments was quarried and sculpted in the crater of Mt. Punapau. Large eyes inserted into the stone lent the figures animation. These eyes, the copies of which today make them look quite terrifying, will certainly have in the past emanated composure and calm, which the artist captured by keeping the edges of the white eyelids as narrow as possible while displaying an oversize opening of the pupils. The hand position also deserves attention as the long, slim fingers are further testimony to the noble descent of the dead.



*Face of a moai (ca. 12th century) lying in the grass in Vinapú behind ahu 2.*

All the *moai* on Easter Island looked towards the village square of their descendants and their presence gave the living protection and self-confidence. The highly venerated dead were probably not buried in the *ahu* until their corpses had decomposed after being wrapped in rushes or tapa, sewn up with banana-leaf fibres and placed on wooden frames by the sea or opposite the dwelling house. The actual mourning ceremony for the dead took place when they were transferred to the village *ahu*.

In the course of time a village brought forth many important men. Hence the *ahu*, the large burial sites, often display a series of *moai* next to one another. Space was left for others to be added. Every *moai* was known by its own name, the name of the deceased person. The symbol of the dead man was possibly carved above into the bowl-shaped cavity in the stone head-gear.

The *ahu* was from the very beginning a burial site even though most of the remains of skeletons are long since lost today. The absence of such remains may have led many a researcher to misinterpret this kind of *ahu* as a temple site, a term that is misleading, indeed nothing short of erroneous. My own view that the *ahu* are in fact burial sites was confirmed by what I read in a publication by Walter Knoche, who set up a meteorological and seismological station on Easter Island for the Chilean government in 1911. And William J. Thomson writes in his „Te Pito te Henua, or Easter Island“ (Report of the National Museum 1889) that well-constructed burial vaults and graves were to be found in the platforms, the *ahu* „containing human remains so old that they crumbled into dust upon exposure to the air“ (1891, 503). Thomson had hundreds of graves as well as all the *ahu* and their burial vaults investigated.

On the west coast of the island the abandoned village square to the north of Hanga-roa with the Tahai *ahu* shows how extensive such a village site must have been, which leads one to suspect that there was also a circular place of worship in the vicinity of the burial site. It is to the east of this ancient settlement at Tahai that the new museum is today located. In a garden to the south of its buildings one of the oldest *moai* on the island is to be found. The severest blow could be dealt to the enemy in warfare if it proved possible to destroy the monument to his ancestors. Vaihú, previously the major settlement on the south coast of the island, provides an example of this: a circular stone monument whose significance for worship is still uncertain has remained intact in front of the *ahu*.



*Rear view of Hanga-kio'e ahu north of Hanga-roa. The moai looks towards the former settlement area now overgrown with grass. In the background on the right the new museum building in Hanga-roa.*

Information on how women, children and simple men were buried is inadequate. In the east they were laid to rest in caves whereas in the west they were interred in deep, round holes in fields. These graves were marked by white-painted, pyramidal cairns, the so-called *arahui* which may possibly have indicated the graves of ordinary people for whom the funeral celebration proper had also not taken place until after the decomposition of their corpses. Thomson mentions that under these cairns human remains dating from all ages were to be found: in these „receptacles“ he discovered fresh bones piled up alongside those which were so old that they immediately crumbled into dust when exposed to the air. For him the almost depopulated island seemed to resemble a huge ghost town „and the platforms along the sea-coast appear to have been the favorite burial places in all ages“ (op.cit., 484).

At present the graveyard of Hanga-roa links the main town on the island with the abandoned ancient settlements on the coast to the north of it. This graveyard recalls the graves in European cemeteries whose headstones will not on the whole survive the centuries either. The abandoned stone monuments

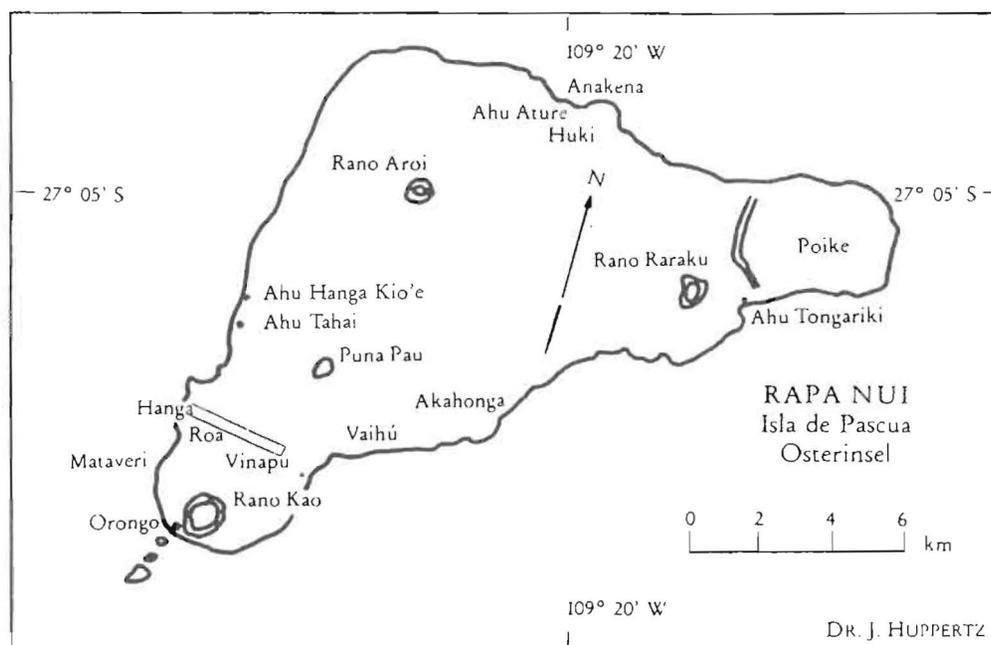
on Easter Island thus bear even greater testimony to a depressing situation. The ancestral villages no longer exist; their inhabitants have died out. The ancestors are no longer venerated by any descendants. Thus tabus can no longer be respected either. Consequently the spirit of the ancestors, if it should still be present, no longer needs to ward off evil spirits but can wreak good or ill at will.

### Conclusion

The present Catholic inhabitants of the island, who were in the pastoral care of the Bavarian Capuchin Father Luis Bertrand Riedl till 1992, still fear the spirits of the dead who, in the thinking of the living, continue to dwell in the vicinity of their burial places. We, for our part, are not afraid of the spirits of the dead of ancient burial grounds. Nevertheless, we are filled with amazement to discover that the Easter Islanders' veneration of the dead has parallels worldwide. Examples could be cited from Central Asia or even from the west of the Eurasian region: in the latter case examples are to be found in the burial sites of the Hallstatt culture such as that in Hirschlanden to the west of Stuttgart (Baden-Württemberg, Germany), where people erected full-figure statues of the persons to be venerated on their gravemounds. This shows that in prehistory and early history ancestor worship was almost globally practised and displayed significant similarities in its ways of expression. This reminds us that human thinking and feeling know no geographical bounds.



*The Tahai burial sites north of Hanga-roa. Farther inland the former settlement, now overgrown with grass, is to be seen in the background.*



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