



Figure 1: Curanto - food prepared in a traditional umu (earth oven) is distributed to all festival visitors.

## “Ariki meets Tangata manu” Tapati Rapa Nui, a festival of indigenous identity or expression of constructed authenticity?

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**Abstract:** Rapa Nui, Easter Island, has had a great fascination for archaeological research since its discovery in 1722. The focus of interest was on the massive stone monuments, the moai, sculptures with a human face, which raise many questions. This stone evidence of Polynesian culture’s uniqueness led to its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995.

Central elements of the cultural identity of minorities often do not find enough reverberation in nation-states. In the case of Rapa Nui, the island in the South Pacific that has been part of Chile since its annexation in September 1888, the rebellion against ruling powers has manifested itself not only in political protests but also in cultural terms, particularly in recent decades. This return to tradition and indigenous identity is particularly evident at the annual Tapati Rapa Nui Festival, whose origins go back to the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the correlation between tourist growth and the increasing expansion of the festival also allows an economic interpretation, although the islanders point to its primarily identity-enhancing function.

Whether we are dealing with tradition or traditionalism in the definition of Mückler and Faschingeder (2012) at the Tapati Rapa Nui Festival is the subject of this research note.

**Keywords:** Rapa Nui, Cultural Performance, Authenticity, Indigenous identity

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Figure 4: Participants in the competition for the production of flower crowns, paintings and shell necklaces in Hanga Piko.

“reign” for the coming year, can be interpreted as a reference to the Birdman cult<sup>2</sup>, which was practised on the island from around 1500 AD until the last documented ceremony in 1866 (Esen-Baur 1983; Weiss 1978). The victorious tribal leader of the yearly competition was called *Tangata manu* or “Birdman”. This ritual, dedicated to the creation god *MakeMake*, commemorated the discovery and possession of the first egg laid by the sooty tern on Motu Nui, a small island off the coast of Rapa Nui (Mückler 2009).

Candidates of the Tapati are young, unmarried women, usually in their late teens or early twenties. At first sight, what sounds like a well-known beauty contest, at a closer look, turns out to be a festival celebrating the islanders’ culture and tradition. The contestants compete for individual fame, prizes, and points for the *ariki* title’s final vote. This title is awarded for one year and entitles the winner to certain privileges such as cash and material prizes, study scholarships, and travel. Although there is no limit to the number of candidates, the considerable financial and human resources required for a Tapati application result in only two or three candidates who compete (Bendrup 2008).

The Tapati Festival, which was first carried out in 1967 - in the beginning as a copy of the Chilean Spring Festival<sup>3</sup> - serves to revive cultural practices, pass them on to subsequent generations and strengthen social ties and structures. The individual Tapati competitions, which are contested not only by the candidates but also by other members of the family, cover a wide range of sports (Rapa Nui triathlon, horse race, canoeing, javelin,

fishing), some of which quite extreme, arts and crafts performances (Figure 4) (production of traditional mahute fabric, carving, sculpturing, production of flower crowns, feather hats and shell necklaces), and folkloric singing and dancing performances (Figure 5).

### Theoretical embedding in the discourse of tradition and authenticity

This research, which is theoretically located at the interface between ethnohistory and identity research, tries to link cultural authenticity and performance analysis. In addition to the debate on tradition (Keesing & Tonkinson 1982; Hanson 1989; Thomas 1992) versus traditionalism (Mückler & Faschingeder 2012) in the sense of “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012), I argue that the festival in its current form is increasingly moving from a festival of and for the islanders to a money-making tourist spectacle.

“Indigenous traditions, like all traditions, are not fossilized remains of the past; they are constantly being reinterpreted and resignified to accommodate innovations and socio-cultural changes that constantly bombard their lives both from within and without their societies.” (Ramos cited in Rivas, 2017: 414) This quote by Brazilian ethnologist Alcida Rita Ramos focuses on an important aspect. Traditions, and here in particular indigenous traditions, must not be interpreted as “sacred” ancestral traditions, but rather as part of ongoing negotiation and reappraisal of history and identity. Dittmer (2021 in this volume) takes a similar approach in her research note when she tackles the issue of how

Pacific Islanders’ identity is viewed by external observers.

Over time, Tapati has undergone many changes. For example, various competitions of the festival were held in specific places on the island in the past: “Every competition had its place” (Andrade Buscar 2004). One of the reasons for choosing different locations was that the locals wanted to commemorate events at particular sites to give them a specific meaning. Using them in this context was intended to transform the sites into physical and cultural reservoirs of knowledge, restore the mythical time and importance attached to them at the time, and create a link between life and place.

Following a competition on a location like Rano Raraku, the quarry where the moai (Figure 6) were cut out of the volcanic rock is undoubtedly imposing and builds a historical bridge to the people who created these statues. Or, to follow a performance on the beach of Anakena, the bay where, according to mythical lore, chief Hotu Matua, who came from the East Pacific region to Rapa Nui, went ashore. Although these physical manifestations of emotional references have been largely lost in present days for various reasons, the reports of events surrounding Tapati continue to point out where the foundations and connections to the ancestors originally lay.

Despite these efforts to increase the attractiveness of the festival, the motives for the constant expansion and adaptation of the event were of economic nature. The two weeks of the festival are the most important time for local tourism and contribute significantly to the income of the residents. Although the islanders stress the fact that most of the activities are “traditional” and are held in *rapanui*, the percentage of foreign elements that are communicated as traditional is increasing. For example, the queen’s coronation with a crown cannot be verified in any historical equivalent. The sash given to the queen is made of *mahute*<sup>4</sup>, but it is a sash like those worn by winners of international beauty contests (Fortin 2009). It is not about condemning these elements as modernisation or accuse them of lacking authenticity. But one could argue that this development is a logical one, in which a culture takes over aspects of other cultures and thus shows that it is progressing, growing, and moving



instead of freezing and dying. Nevertheless, it is important to identify these changes and adaptations and explain that this decision is quite controversially discussed among the people living on the island. This change becomes particularly clear when looking at the structure of the festival in the last two years.

The dramaturgy was originally designed around a competition between two families and the “rule” for the coming year, and thus clearly interpreted as a reference to the Birdman cult’s long-practised ritual. But from 2019 onwards, the organisers were no longer able to persuade a second family to participate.

### Reasons for this development

The expansion of the festival and the introduction of new elements not in line with initial intentions resulted in a fundamental rejection of the Tapati Festival by many of the 36 *mata* (tribes) on the island. A growing number of Rapanui people withdraw from active participation in the festival because of increasing influences from continental Chileans who live on Rapa Nui, a taxi driver, who is Chilean himself, tells me on the way from the airport to the city. (Interview with anonymous, 2020). Therefore, a deep division concerning the festival within the Rapanui community becomes obvious. New travel restrictions to the island, in force since 2018, were intended to counteract this development. Another resident on the island for almost thirty years even goes a step further and locates the problem in the “nature of the indigenous population”: “Residence laws will not help there either. The problem is the Rapanui themselves [...] they are lazy. They take the workers from the mainland, but on the other hand, they do not really want them on the island.” (Interview with Zsakai, 2020)

The increasing formation of groups among the residents leads to more and more controversies within the indigenous community that are openly carried out. In this context, I have to highlight the investigations and accusations of corruption against the mayor and the leadership of *Ma’u Henua*, an indigenous community that runs the National Park (Young 2020). This social rift and other major problems that the organisers of Tapati have to face have been described by Greindl (Interview, 2020): “In the last few years, it has become more and more a tourist show [...] the



Figure 5: Takona (body painting) - a participant of the competition in Hanga Vare Vare.

biggest part is alcohol. Like a big binge drinking with participants and tourists [...] for two years now, it has been a little better since the festival area, and *farándula* (Figure 3) are no longer served alcohol [...] now the situation has improved a little.”

She also notes that in particular the grand parade at the end of the festival is no longer understood as a festival of Rapanui in which the community presents itself in its cultural diversity, but is celebrated exclusively as a tourist attraction in which, apart from the candidate’s family, the islanders show little interest. This results in a decrease in the number of participants and spectators, which in 2020 was only a fraction compared to previous years.

In this apparent division of the population, one can also see an instrumentalisation of Tapati for political purposes. Although the indigenous groups are not necessarily interested in complete political independence from Chile (which seems to be a difficult project from an economic point of view), they want to achieve self-determination and political and cultural emancipation. In addition to recurring violent conflicts on the island, this tendency is also reflected in the rejection of the increasing commodification of the festival by indigenous Rapanui. The open conflict was brought to outsiders’ attention when, during Tapati 2020, the *Haka Peré*, one of the most popular events, was first officially cancelled and then still carried out by *Ma’u Henua*, who sees herself as the representative and official voice of the indigenous community.

“We sponsored this event through placing safety barriers for the public and grooming the track for the competitors

in order to avoid accidents that have occurred in previous years. We hope to continue to preserve and rescue the traditions of the Rapanui people [...]” (Ma’u Henua Celebrates Pei Amo 2020).

*Ma’u Henua*’s reaction shows that the preservation of traditions is important to the population. Therefore, it is not surprising that, although the event was not even mentioned with a word on the municipality’s official portals, the influx of visitors especially from the Rapanui community was enormous.

### Conclusion

Although more and more Rapanui are withdrawing giving the impression that the festival is being left exclusively for tourist marketing, the past year marked by COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced an emerging reflection process. Claims for reflection and a refocusing of the festival on the cultural heritage can be observed (Municipalidad de Rapa Nui 2020).

Whereas the economy of Rapa Nui relies to 90% on tourism, and a major portion of the income is generated during the Tapati Festival period, most of the “Continental”, Chileans working in the tourism sector, left the island after a complete lockdown has been imposed on the island in March 2020. As a result, the total population (which was around 7,800 in 2018) on the island dropped dramatically – it seems that Rapanui people are getting back their island. Although economically problematic, the isolation that the island is facing for almost a year now, can be seen as an opportunity to fill the Tapati vision with new life. As it is expected that commercial flights to the island will not reopen before mid-2021,



Figure 6: A moai watching over the people of Rapa Nui.

the festival has been shortened to one week. Moreover, the organisers of the festival intended to celebrate the return to their roots, OF and FOR the residents of Rapa Nui (Tapati Rapa Nui Oficial 2020).

Since natural resources are very scarce on the island, electricity is provided by generators, water is precious and depleted, everything, from industrial to consumer goods and even most of the food supply has to be imported from the mainland. The steady accumulation of garbage, over-fishing, the constant increase of tourist arrivals, but also lichenification and erosion processes that slowly destroy the giant moai go hand in hand with social developments described in this paper. Such developments increasingly demand actions to preserve the island's cultural heritage and sensitive ecological balance. Therefore, it is not surprising and a sign of hope for this magnificent festival when a Rapanui woman comments alongside one of the competitions: "... write that down! We don't do this for you visitors [...] we don't play anything for you. We LIVE our culture every day!" (Interview with anonymous, 2020)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Rongorongo script consists of horizontally arranged and to the right running symbols in the form of anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic figures or objects, which were carved into wooden panels or sticks with pointed tools.

<sup>2</sup> The ritual was an annual competi-

tion to collect the first egg of the sooty tern from Motu Nui, a small island offshore Rapa Nui.

<sup>3</sup> Following the incorporation of Easter Island into the Chilean political system, this festival, ordered by the administration in 1967 and very widespread in Latin America, was intended to highlight the link with the mainland.

<sup>4</sup> Bark of the Paper mulberry tree

<sup>5</sup> This risky game consists of sliding down the hillside, lying on a kind of rustic sledge built with two trunks of bananas joined together. At speeds that sometimes reach 80 km/h, the contestants descend to the base of the hill.

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