

Easter Island: Secrets in the Stone

A Photo Essay

by **Bea Broda Connolly**
BC PICTURES

Located 3700 km. west of Chile, alone in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, Easter Island comprises only 117 square km. With its relative isolation and small size, it is baffling not only that the island was discovered at all but that it has acted as the crossroads of so great a variety of cultures and peoples.

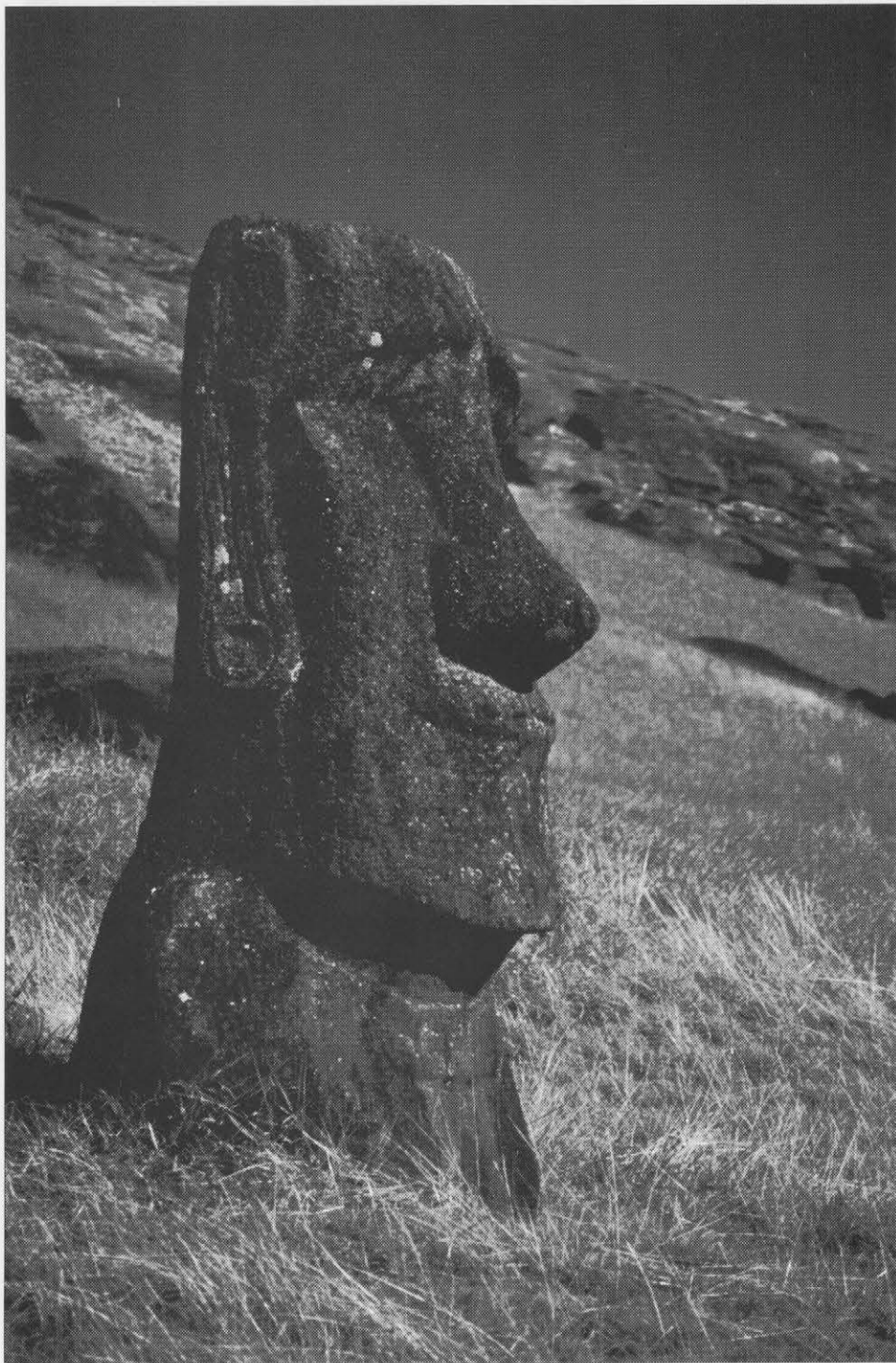
Known also as Isla de Pasqua and Rapa Nui, three races have called Easter Island their native land—amer-indians, polynesians, and whites. It was 'officially' discovered in 1722 by a Dutch crew under Admiral Jacob Roggeveen. He recorded the mysterious presence of giant stone statues, called *moai* [left], as well as his fascination with the natives worship of them.

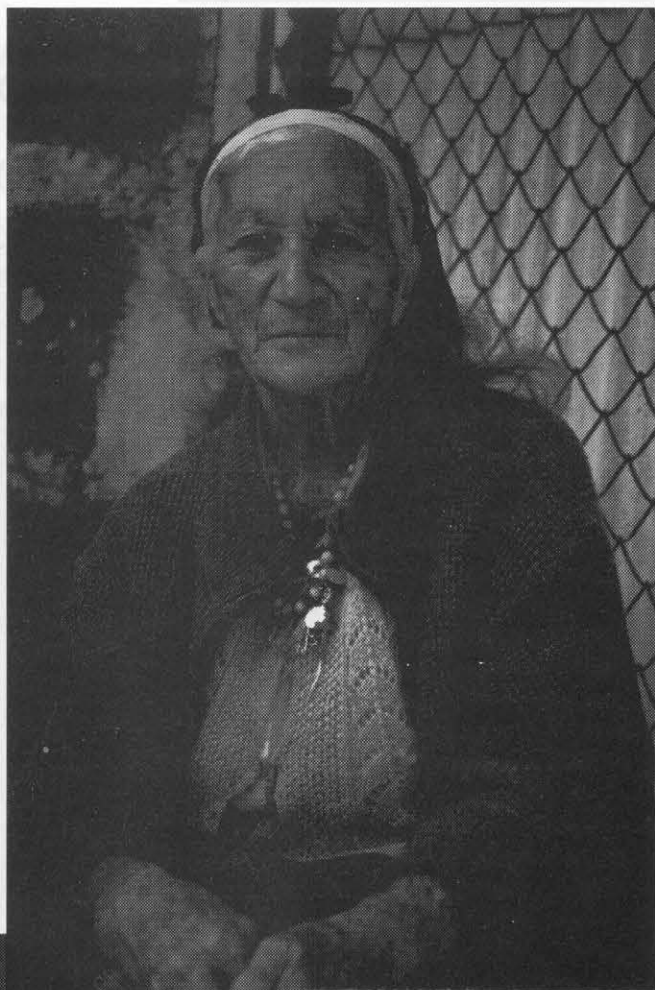
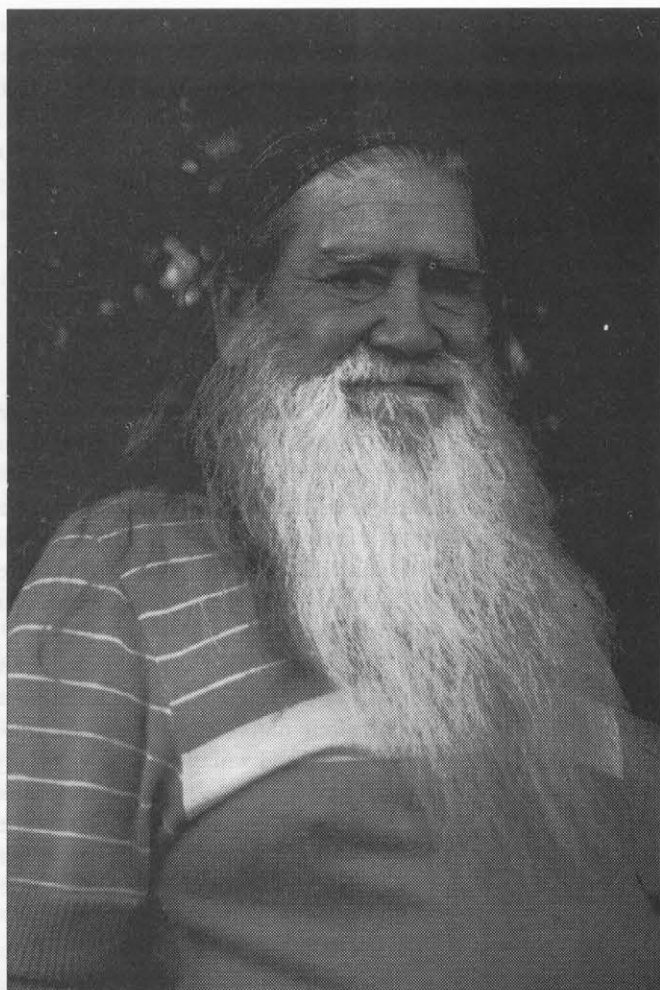
By the time Captain James Cook arrived in 1774, copper-colored Polynesians, as well as white-skinned people, inhabited the island. Many of the moai had already been toppled by warring tribes as an insult to the enemy. The moai seen standing on the island today were re-erected by the British during the nineteenth century.

There are a whole slew of theories concerning the purpose of the giant stone figures. Most people assume that they have some religious purpose. For instance, some islanders say that a spirit dwells within each moai. On the other hand, Cook believed that each sculpture marked a burial place. Regardless, they are certainly significant enough that it was considered an insult to topple the moai and, even today, no one is permitted either to step on or excavate them.

The mystery that shrouds the island has encouraged other, more outrageous, explanations: that the moai were built by extraterrestrial beings, or by the descendants of some lost continent (perhaps even the mythical Atlantis).

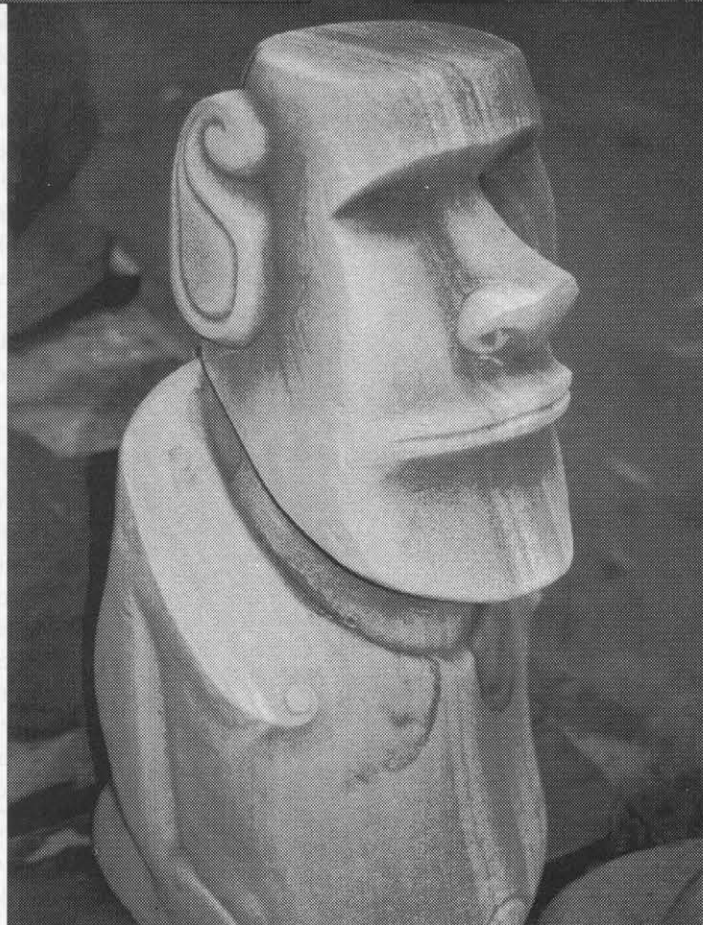
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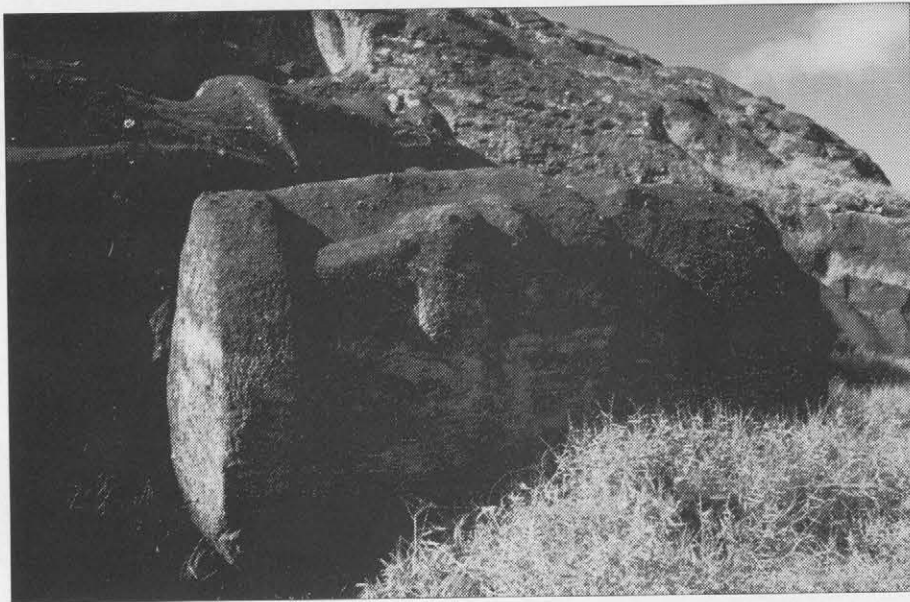
Easter Island remains an Enigma. There has yet to be a satisfactory explanation of where the people came from, how they arrived at Easter Island, why they carved the immense stone moai, and how they accomplished the complex engineering feat of moving them all around the island.

Islanders today are inclined to take the path of least resistance. To the chagrin of those of Polynesian descent—interbreeding has blurred (almost erased, in fact) many of the earlier racial distinctions [above left and right]—Easter Island is now owned and governed by Chile. They are particularly angry



that the best jobs go to those of Chilean origin. The same kind of animosity which brought about the toppling of the moai long ago continues to surge on this small island of tumultuous history.

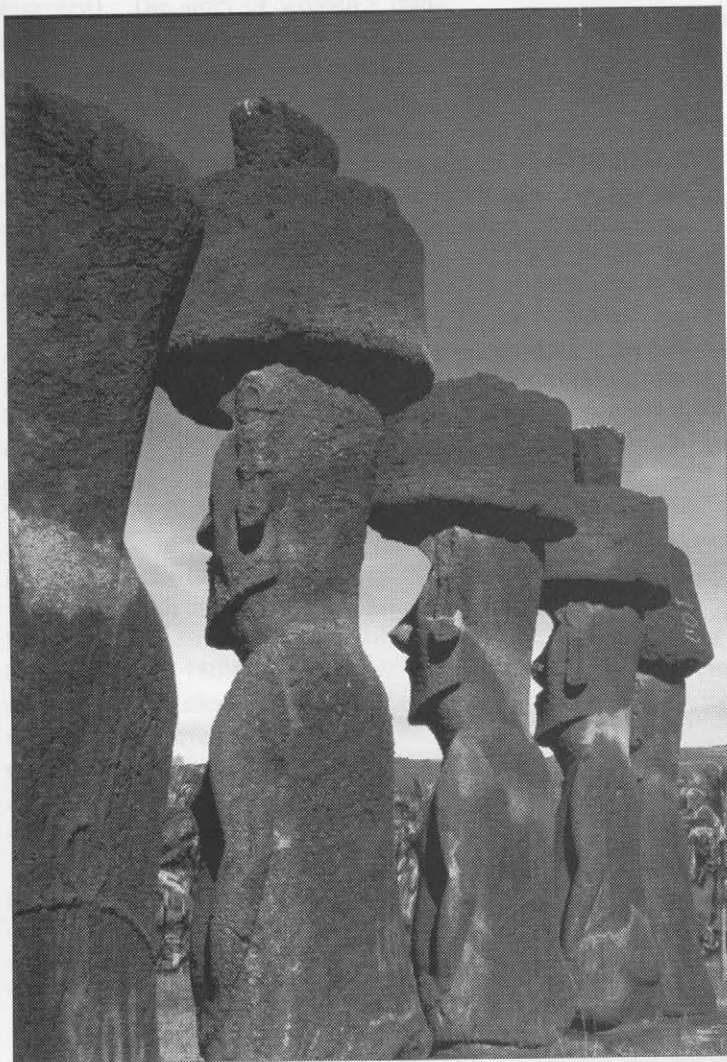
Because a weekly cargo ship is sent to meet the needs of the population, all industry and most agriculture have ended, resulting in a complete dependence on these supplies. Tourism, which includes the mass production of moai replicas [left], has become the primary occupation. A traveller is welcome to stay in the homes of islanders, who are also happy to make dinners and rent their vehicle.



Easter Island is volcanic in origin. The stone used in the construction of the moai (some of which are as high as 10 metres) was all mined on the island from two quarries where partially finished moai can still be seen [left]. The moai are carved from basalt, while their topknots are all made of a red volcanic ash.

While no one really knows, a variety of theories have been proposed explaining the erection of these monuments. The quarried stone may have been rolled to its eventual resting place, or moved along on a wooded platform while suspended by ropes.

Most, but not all, moai were built with red topknots, each weighing the



equivalent of two elephants [below left]. A later development in moai construction, they have been thought to represent anything from hats, to baskets, to crowns, or just the hairstyle of islanders at the time.

Each moai sits atop a stone platform, or *ahu*. Given the religious importance attached to the moai, the *ahu* are generally believed to be the Easter Island equivalent of an altar.

Some moai were built with long ears—others with short ears—a physical feature that delineated two tribes once native to the island. At one point, a civil war broke out on the island, in which all but one of the long ears were exterminated. Today, this lineage is a point of pride for the boy who is the last living descendent of that long ear.



An eerie ambiance prevails on the island. It is as if all of the giant stone moai are waiting silently—forever staring off into the distant winds—for someone to unscramble the riddle, and free their secrets once and for all from the stone that binds them. ●

[below, a moai toppled during the long ear-short ear war]

