

## **The performance of memory in Rapanui theatre**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses how memory has been crucial in the production of theatre in Rapa Nui. Histories of colonial powers in Rapanui have foster the use of memory as a real source of information, not only to gather information about a specific oral narrative, but also about costumes and old customs that otherwise may have been lost from the Rapa Nui culture. The Peruvian slave raids that decimated the indigenous population, the establishment of the Williamson Balfour Company and the implementation of the Chilean education system prohibiting the use of the indigenous language, greatly affected the creation and production of Rapanui performing arts and theatre. This is exemplified by the work of the first Rapanui theater troupe Mata Tu'u Hotu Iti, established in the 1970s. Although the word theatre does not exist in the Rapanui language, this group used the concept of representation to revitalize the language, and re-value past practices and customs of its culture. Through its educational approach and targeting the local audience, Mata Tu'u Hotu Iti laid the foundations for the production of theatre in Rapanui. His influence is such that it continues to inspire the creation and production of theater within the school system and during the local cultural festival Tapati Rapanui.

**Keywords:** theatre, Rapa Nui, performance, memory, Chile, Pacific

Rapanui theatre inherited from the ancestors an epic poetry, and a pantheistic conception of life and the universe. The narrative composition, whether in oral narratives or in recitations, is full of abstractions, which frequently rely on symbols, exaggerations, and an in-depth, descriptive narrative, which by its historical character, is an important document for future generations.

Since its annexation to the Chilean state, the Rapanui culture has been battling against colonial powers, in different fronts, from education and health to the performing arts. Despite their colonial origin, the term 'tradition' and 'traditional', have become a key aspect of most performing arts created by Rapanui artists, especially theatre. Through the representation of past practices, customs and oral narratives that are still in the memory of the contemporary Rapanui population, Rapanui theatre has endeavoured to preserve their customs and language by performing using Rapanui's point of view regarding history and oral narratives, in a different way from the colonial narrative.

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Rapa Nui has been the subject of countless studies in the areas of archaeology, botany, linguistics, geology, and anthropology. Mostly, Rapa Nui is known worldwide for its mōai (stone statue). A long list of Chilean, international and a few Rapanui scholars and researchers, as well as painters, sailors, musicians, tourists and ufologists, have told and retold through different lenses, the history of this particular island.

Although archaeology has been the main focus of research about Rapa Nui, nowadays social and anthropological aspects of this culture have also been considered important to investigate, for example the Rapanui performing arts. Ancient rites and festivities in Rapa Nui have been studied and the theatrical elements that some of these denote, suggests that in Rapa Nui different forms of representation were constantly created and re-created. While the concept of theatre as conceptualised within a Western framework does not exist in the Rapanui language (Huke, 1995: 37), there are several different ways of referring to the art of representation, illustrating the importance of storytelling and oratory in Rapanui culture. For example; haka tike'a atu (to show you), hakararama i te me'e ta'ato'a i te a'amau tuai o Rapanui (to show you everything related in the telling of Rapanui stories), haka 'ite atu (to let you know), mo pata'u ta'u atu (to recite to you).

This article will discuss the importance of memory in the maintenance of customs and oral narratives, as well as its significance in the production of theatre in Rapa Nui. It will discuss the historical background of Rapa Nui which led to the preservation of tradition and the creation of the first Rapanui theatre troupe which revitalized past practices and knowledge through the performance of oral narratives that were still in the memory of the contemporary Rapanui population.

## **A brief historical account**

Oral histories tell of an island called Hiva where the Rapanui people come from. High chief ariki Hotu Matu'a and his people fled from the consequences of a natural disaster, the sinking of their island in the sea (Englert, 1980: 29), "navigating in the direction of Rapa Nui, where they gave birth to the Rapanui culture as we know it today" (Bustamante Diaz, Viguie Juan, Andoue Lelandais, & Tuki Tepano, 2008). The ancestors of Rapanui peoples, in this new land were governed by the ariki, and divided into tribes that occupied the coastal areas (Englert, 1980: 29).

Stories narrating the life of ancestral heroes and their deeds are consistently represented in contemporary Rapanui performances and at present theatre productions are solely based on the representation of 'traditional' stories. Through these performances Rapanui people aim to preserve the memory of their 'traditional' stories, transmitting them to future generations as part of Rapanui history. The arrival of the ancestor Hotu Matu'a is one of the 'traditional' stories most frequently performed in Rapa Nui.

The arrival of Western sailors to Rapa Nui's shores led to significant changes to the island. The first contact with foreign explorers came with the arrival of the Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1722. Captain James Cook visited the island during his second voyage (1772 – 1775) to the South Pacific (Métraux, 1971: 37). The French explorer La Perousse also visited the island in 1786 (Métraux, 1971: 38). The next visitors to Rapa Nui initiated a series of events which have enduring significance for the forms and possibilities for performing arts. The Peruvian slavery expeditions of 1862 decimated the Rapanui population, dramatically altering the social, cultural and economic structure of the island. As a consequence of the abolition of African slavery in 1823, Peruvian

authorities sought new sources of labour from the Pacific Islands. Peru embarked on four separate slave raids in Rapa Nui, recruiting a total of 1407 islanders, and removing 34% of the island's estimated population (Maude, 1981: 20). By the time some Rapanui slaves had managed to return to their homeland in 1863, many of them were ill with tuberculosis, smallpox, and dysentery (Fischer, 2005: 89). These diseases spread rapidly, killing a great portion of the Rapanui population (Fischer, 2005: 91) and leaving an estimated 25% of the total indigenous population alive (Boersema, 2015: 143).

These events combined to ensure that there were only a small number of people left to nurture and transmit Rapanui's culture. The surviving Indigenous population felt understandably responsible for maintaining links with their past, and for transmitting knowledge of Rapanui culture and oral histories to future generations. This aspect of Rapanui history is of great importance, as the survivors used their memories as an agent for cultural preservation. The intergenerational transmission of memories as a form of knowledge has been severely impacted by histories of colonialism in Rapa Nui, which have enduring consequences for the performing arts and the production of theatre in the present. The decimation of the indigenous population of Rapa Nui has contributed to the weight accorded to the preservation and performance of traditional oral narratives that were still in the memory of its inhabitants. The decision to preserve oral histories and traditions through performance is grounded in a necessary and pragmatic strategy for cultural survival. The arrival of Catholic missionaries between 1864 and 1871 significantly altered the living patterns of Rapanui peoples. Nelson Castro's thesis *Misioneros y Milenaristas – Isla de Pascua 1864-1914* states that this was the first time that Europeans settled in the island for a period of time. The establishment of the Catholic mission occurred during a moment of crisis in Rapanui society (Arredondo, 2009: 41). After the slave raids, Rapanui society lost the spiritual leadership of the ariki (high chief) who was a symbol of order and command. This apparent lack of leadership in the Indigenous community enhanced a perception of the missionaries as possessing "strong mana"<sup>1</sup> (Castro, 1996: 24). The influence of Catholic missionaries led to the abandonment of many practices, including various forms of indigenous art and performance. For example, the art of body painting was banned because it was seen by the missionaries as an erotic practice involving excessive admiration for the body (Arredondo, 2009: 21).

The alteration of social structures and cultural practices in Rapa Nui included the decline and disappearance of the annual *Taʻataʻa<sup>2</sup> Manu* (birdman) competition. This was an important feature of cultural practice which contributed to establishing leadership structures in Indigenous Rapanui society. This competition was celebrated during September in Oroʻo, a village at the top of the southern volcano Rano Kau. From the top of this volcano three small islets can be seen, Motu Iti, Motu Nui, and Motu Kaokao (Figure 1). During the springtime birds found a perfect nesting place on these islets. The *Taʻataʻa Manu* competition consisted of contestants racing down the cliffs; swimming one kilometre until they reached Motu Nui, finding the first egg laid by the frigate birds nesting there, swimming and climbing back to the top of the cliff, and returning to Oroʻo village.

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<sup>1</sup> Power, physical and mental strength

<sup>2</sup> The ʻa correlates to the "-ng" sound represented in written Māori by the ng and in Samoan by the letter g.



**Fig. 1.** View of the three islets, Motu Iti, Motu Nui and Motu Kaokao from Oroño, Photography by M. Fortin.

The first competitor arriving back at the starting point of the race gave the representative of his tribe the honour of becoming the new governor of Rapa Nui for one year (Métraux, 1971: 332). The *Taŋata Manu* competition was performed for the last time in 1866. It was witnessed by missionaries Eyraud and Roussel (Museo Antropológico Padre Sebastian Englert, 2008: 3). Although there is no clear evidence that this competition was banned by missionaries, it is likely that due to the introduction and ever-increasing dominance of the Catholic religion, and the adoption of its leadership structures, the ritual may no longer have seemed necessary for Rapanui peoples.

The work of Rapanui theatre group Mata Tu‘u Hotu Iti in the 1970s, which will be discussed in the following pages, revived the *Taŋata Manu* ceremony by representing it through theatre in the village of Oroño. Currently, the *Taŋata Manu* competition is remembered through songs, dances, and drama as a regular part of the repertoire performed by the different dance groups existing in Rapa Nui. The competition has also influenced the production of creative work for the different cultural festivals in Rapa Nui.<sup>3</sup>

## Colonial control and impact

The annexation of Rapa Nui to Chile in 1888 brought significant socio-cultural changes which are recorded through documents including treaties and leases (Bendrup, 2005; Delsing, 2004; S.R.Fisher, 2005; Porteus, 1981). In the late nineteenth century the Captain of the Chilean Navy Policarpo Toro arrived on the island. Toro initiated legal proceedings for the annexation of Easter Island to Chile on behalf of the Chilean President José Manuel Balmaceda (Fortin, 2016: 42). On the 9<sup>th</sup> September 1888 the *Acuerdo de Voluntades* between the Chilean Government and ariki Atamu Tekena was signed, formally annexing Rapa Nui to Chile. This agreement was written in both Spanish and Rapanui languages, and it conceded sovereignty to Chile, whilst allowing Rapanui chiefs keep their titles. This agreement, like the Treaty of Waitangi between a delegation of Māori and the English Crown, set the tone for a bicultural environment which Rapa Nui has lived in to the present day, even though no official policy regarding biculturalism has been yet established.

The treaty with Chile did not result in the settlement of Chilean authorities on the island. On the contrary, the island was leased by Chile to the British Williamson Balfour Company between 1895 and 1953 (Fuentes, 2013). The company exploited the island’s natural resources, using most of the island as a giant sheep farm (Porteous, 1981: 71). The writings of Porteous, (1981), H. Fischer (1998) and S. R. Fischer (2005) describe this period as full of injustices and abuse against Rapanui peoples. However, Rapanui elder Felipe Pakarati describes the time of the Company on the island as not completely unpleasant (Pakarati, 2011: 298). The forced cohabitation to which the Rapanui peoples were subjected by the Williamson Balfour Company had a violent beginning. However, “the

<sup>3</sup> In 2014 the High School Aldea Educativa organised a short version of this competition as part of the commemoration of the school’s festival Mahana O Te Re’o (Language Day).

domestication of colonial power” (Moreno Pakarati, 2013: 287) led foreigners to adopt to some extent the Rapanui life style (Moreno Pakarati, 2011: 79–81). The fact that the company stayed on the island for half a century (S. R. Fischer, 2005: 135) allowed Rapanui people to implement a number of strategies that would bring the commercial powers closer to the Rapanui culture. In addition, several company members started families with Rapanui women, hence the concern for the welfare of the islanders was no longer a subject between employer-employee, but became complicated by family relationships. In 2011 I had the opportunity to conduct a theatre workshop together with Annette Zamora Rapu, Rapanui language teacher at Catholic School. In this workshop we examined the role of the Williamson Balfour Company as a research topic for the production of a school play. The information was provided through interviews the students conducted to their grandparents of what they remembered of this time period.

In 1938 a grand celebration took place in Rapa Nui to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the annexation of the island to the Chilean territory. The governor at the time Dr. Alvaro Tejada Lawrence organised a Rapanui folkloric presentation on the 18<sup>th</sup> September, to coincide with the celebration of the independence of Chile (Bendrup, 2005). For the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration Rapanui musicians were asked to present old songs, which bewildered the musicians as in the Rapanui culture, old songs were only sung during special occasions and not to be presented in public (Bendrup, 2005). Tejada's request turned out to be complex and challenging, since some lyrics were not completely remembered by Rapanui peoples. This prompted Rapanui musicians to create new fragments. Rapanui artists decided to perform in the form of a koro haka opo which is a choir competition. The songs chosen for this event were the ones that were preserved in their memory telling ancient stories. This celebration combined Rapanui traditional musical repertoire with “new compositions for the purpose of the celebration” (Bendrup, 2005: 226). The contemporary compositions of that time are now understood as belonging to Rapanui's repertoire of ‘traditional’ music.

The administration of Rapa Nui by the Chilean Navy between 1953 and 1975 brought more changes to the lifestyle of Rapanui peoples that affected social behaviour and artistic production. For example Rapanui peoples were prohibited from leaving the island, speaking the Rapanui language at school, and made Rapa Nui citizens ineligible to participate in Chilean elections (Porteous, 1981: 171). These prohibitions created a climate of tension between Rapanui peoples and the Chilean administration resulting in a protest march in 1964. The march was led by Alfonso Rapu, an Indigenous Rapanui leader who had returned to his homeland after graduating as a school teacher in Chile (Porteous, 1981: 171). The march demanded that prohibitions affecting the island be removed, and claimed that there was a lack of progress in Rapanui society in terms of infrastructure and communication with Chile. All these antecedents prompted the creation of the first theatre group Mata Tu‘u Hotu Iti (Huke, 1995: 42).

### **Mata Tu‘u Hotu Iti: the first theatre troupe in Rapa Nui**

Mata Tu‘u Hotu Iti (MTHI), emerged as the first theatre company in Rapa Nui. The Huke and Tuki families established this group in 1975. The name of the group “was drawn from the shared ancestral lands of these clans” (Bendrup, 2005: 309), where the word Mata means clan and Hotu Iti refers to a specific site on the Southern part of the island. These families sought to tell and remember their own histories, creating performances not for tourists, but for the Rapanui people (Huke, 1995: 43). MTHI emerged as an influential group, motivated in part by the many political and social changes that had happened in Chile and on the island; for example the prohibition on

speaking the Rapanui language in the early years of the establishment of education on the island, “because the first priority was to teach Spanish” (Arredondo, 2012: 69).

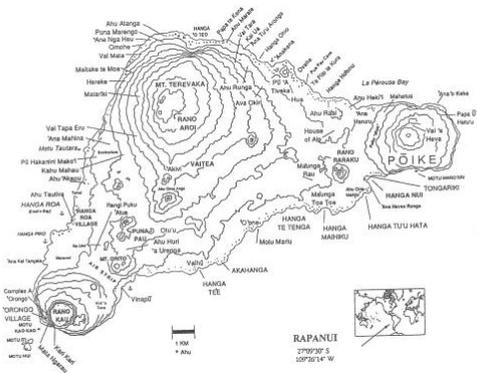
The company had three main objectives: firstly, to recover, rebuild and maintain the Rapanui history; secondly, to raise their cultural heritage as an effective tool for the development of their culture, demonstrating the value of past practices; and thirdly, to avoid loss of language (Huke, 1995: 45). MTHI reconstructed their stories depicting legends and traditions using songs, dance, and poetry, as well as incorporating elements of Western theatre techniques such as the pantomime. Over time, the Rapanui community validated these theatre performances, because the troupe was embracing tradition, becoming therefore an extension of ancient cultural practices, bringing back to life practices that were in the memory of the people, reflecting both contemporary culture and ancestral traditions (Huke, 1995: 43) thus “influencing many current Rapanui performances” (Bendrup, 2005: 311) (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2.** Mata Tu‘u Hotu Iti performing a narrative about the Taŋata Manu at Oroŋo (Huke, 1995: 58).

In the work of MTHI, Rapanui forms of representation served as tools to explain to the world and its people the meaning of their existence. With their performances, the company forged identity and gave a sense of belonging to different generations, due to the three hundred young Rapanui people who became involved in the group's activities between 1974 and 1999 (Huke, 1995: 43).

MTHI performed at the Pacific Festival of Arts in 1976 and 1985 (Huke, 1995: 63). Their performances and participation in the Festival, created a strong sense of belonging among its participants. The participants not only were part of the troupe, they also discovered a sense of belonging to the wider Pacific community. In the history of Rapanui performing arts it is possible to draw a line defining the time before and after MHTI, setting the foundation for future Rapanui performances.



**Fig. 3.** Map of Rapa Nui (S.R. Fischer, 2005: 32).

The group performed oral narratives in different parts of Rapa Nui. Natural settings were used as stage for the different performances. For example “Anakena, Ovahe, Ahu Tautira, Tahai [and] Orongo” (Huke, 1995: 52) (see Figure 3). *Kaija* (1993) was performed at Ovahe Beach. This story is about war between two clans, the Miru and the Tuopahotu, in which avenging the deaths of the main characters is the central action of the story. MTHI chose to use the entire beach for its representation of this story (see Figure 4), and this natural stage also included a cave and the sea.

There was no predetermined space for the audience, and during the performance it seemed as if the audience was in some way invisible to the actors. Claudia Quiroga, a Chilean citizen living in Rapa Nui at that time, remembers that sometimes the actors came running towards or close to the audience, without acknowledging the presence of people (Quiroga, 2009). Audience members explained that experiencing a theatre performance on a beach, lit only by torches, and featuring actors wearing traditional costumes or body painted and hearing only the Rapanui language “was very impressive” (Quiroga, 2009). This naturalistic performance allowed audiences to feel transported to a different time and place as if “you had travelled back in time and you were watching something that was truly happening here and now... but not a play” (Quiroga, 2009).

Through choosing Ovahe beach for performances, MTHI selected a natural amphitheatre that included features perfect for the representation of this piece. The different locations narrated in the story were easily translated onto the stage that Ovahe beach provided, including the audience entrance, Kaija’s village, the cave where one of the characters hid, and the different paths used by the enemy clan to invade and kill. Something that happened during the performance, that possibly nobody thought about, was that the tide began to get higher and higher, so the stage became smaller and smaller. The audience had little room and the actors had difficulty moving around.



**Fig. 4.** Use of space in *Kaija* (1993), Photography by M. Fortin.

The most anticipated performance was MTHI’s representation of *The Arrival of Ariki Hotu Matu’a* during Tapati. This performance represented through dances and songs the arrival of what it is believed to be the first migration of Polynesians to Rapa Nui. The performance used to take place in Oromaja, nowadays known as Anakena beach, where according to oral narratives Hotu Matu’a arrived. Usually the performance started at the beach where it was possible to see Hotu Matu’a and his people chanting while walking towards a mōai platform that is currently located in Anakena. Other times, the group adorned a fishing boat, starting the performance from the water. You could

see a boat full of people dressed in traditional costumes sailing towards the beach, where the performer representing Hotu Matu'a would disembark and start walking towards the platform followed by the group of people chanting and dancing.

### The formalisation of theatre in Rapa Nui

The last performance by MTHI took place during the cultural summer festival Tapati Rapa Nui in 1999. As a response to the loss of performances by this group, during the 2000 festival organisers created a competition based on the practice of a'amu tuai<sup>4</sup>. A panel of judges were chosen who evaluated fidelity to oral traditions, creativity, choreography, expression and organization of a'amu tuai performances. These plays were performed in largely the same way MTHI used to perform them except that rather than being held in a natural setting the performances are on a stage, and made use of technology including lighting and wireless microphones (Figure 5).



**Fig. 5.** Performance of the play *Tu'u Ko Ibu* during Tapati Rapa Nui 2009, Photography courtesy of Comisión Tapa Nui Rapa Nui.

Over the years, a'amu tuai have become a popular aspect of contemporary Rapanui society, becoming part of the school system. Musician Carlos Lillo Haoa works at Aldea Educativa Honga'a o te Mana high school teaching music with a strong connection to storytelling. Lillo Haoa explained that initially the main idea for him to work at school was to teach Rapanui music. He states, "I don't know how to read music or notes... but I know lots of old Rapanui songs... and stories! And those stories are the ones I use to create music... so I guess going from music to a'amu tuai wasn't so strange" (Lillo Haoa, 2014).

Each year schools organise Mahana O Te Re'o (Rapanui Language Day), where the work of students around the use of Rapanui language is presented and shared with students from other schools on the island. For Lillo Haoa "this is the best place to do a'amu tuai, telling stories in Rapanui [language]!" (Lillo Haoa, 2014). When he first started working at Aldea Educativa and preparing the presentation for Mahana O Te Re'o he thought "what am I going to teach the kids!? I know nothing about theatre" (Lillo Haoa, 2014). The idea of doing theatre was terrifying, but after re-connecting with some of Rapanui oral narratives that he remembered, investigating about oral narratives that other members of the community had still in their memory, and remembering performances and rehearsals he saw of Mata Tu'u Hotu Iti, the idea of doing a'amu tuai with the students was a lot more appealing, "so we started doing a'amu tuai... our own version of theatre" (Lillo Haoa, 2014).

During Mahana O Te Re'o in 2008, Lillo Haoa and the students of Aldea Educativa high school performed their first a'amu tuai. On that occasion they showed *He A'amu Tuai o Hetereki 'a Rau Nui* (Figure 6) a performance which dealt with the intertribal warfare occurring before the arrival of the

<sup>4</sup> Telling old stories. Nowadays it is the Rapanui term commonly used when referring to theatre.

Europeans to the island. This performance was based on the rules and style that the competition of a'amu tuai has within the context of the Tapati, and it was also influenced by the performance aesthetic and characteristics used by Mata Tu'u Hotu Iti. For example, Lillo Haoa and the team of teachers who coordinated the performance decided to represent a story that was related with the location of the Aldea Educativa. Near the school there is a petroglyph depicting a foot print. According to oral narratives, this foot print was made by Hetereki 'a Rau Nui, a great warrior who trained in the art of war along with his brothers.



**Fig. 6.** Koro Pate Tuki and Merahi Pate in the performance of *Hetereki 'a Rau Nui* (2008), Photography courtesy of Aldea Educativa Hoŋa'a o te Mana.

The main objective of this work, according to the Head of Aldea Educativa Katherine Ringeling, was that students could gain knowledge of other Rapanui performing arts such as *kaikai* (string figures), *pata'u ta'u* (recitation), *takona* (body painting), *ori* (dance) as well as practicing the use of the Rapanui language through storytelling and theatre (Ringeling, 2014). Therefore, all those Rapanui performing arts were included in the performance, narrating the story of Hetereki from different perspectives. For example, once the story finished, the songs began. Performers filled the stage, sat down and sang a *ute* (song of celebration) related to the story of Hetereki. Next the *hoko*, a dance very similar to the māori *haka*, and a *pata'u ta'u* about the story were performed, and finally music, guitar and ukulele started, announcing the beginning of the dances. Performers stood up and danced a song created for the presentation, based on the previously recited *patat'u ta'u*.

Perhaps the lack of information regarding some performing arts, made it difficult to be integrated as a whole in the performance. The first task of the work was to collect and read the different versions existing about this story. Lillo Haoa studied for several months with Rapanui elder Papa Kiko, who was one of the last persons who had in depth knowledge and recollections about ancient Rapanui stories. The following task was to seek information about songs, dances, *kaikai* and *pata'u ta'u* that were related to the story of Hetereki. This task proved to be difficult because contemporary Rapanui society only remembered the existence of a *kaikai* related to the story "but nobody remembered how to do this *kaikai*, well at least we used the *pata'u ta'u*" (Lillo Haoa, 2009). This performance is a good example of how memory can be performed on stage, a giant puzzle put together based on memories about traditional practices and oral narratives.

In 2012 Lillo Haoa and the students performed the a'amu tuai called *Pou Va'e Tea*. This play tells the story of the last governor elected through the *Taŋata Manu* (Bird Man) competition. In 2013 Lillo Haoa directed *Haka Haere Mōai*, a performance based on the orally transmitted story of Tu'u Ko Ihu, a man who sculpted the first *mōai kavakava*, a wood carving of a man without flesh, showing its bones representing the spirits. These performances are examples of the use of theatre as a way of keeping memory alive, in a highly globalised world, making Rapanui history accessible and stopping to some extent the inexorable advance of external influences that could have helped the disappearance of this culture.

Lillo Haoa also directs the group Maori<sup>5</sup> Tupuna, and during Tapati 2013 they created a performance that showed parts of the contemporary history of Rapa Nui. In fact, it was the first time Rapanui's contemporary history was shown at the most important stage of Rapa Nui, Tapati. In 2013 the Maori Tupuna dance group had already confirmed their participation in Tapati as a show apart from the competition. Each year for Tapati, two or three girls from different families participate as candidates to be crowned queen of Tapati. In 2013, young women were not interested in participating, and no one signed up as a candidate for the title of the Queen of Tapati. The municipality and organizing committee of Tapati suggested a male crowning, as an alternative; an aito (brave) Rapanui man would be crowned. In addition to participating in the sports competitions during the day, male candidates had to show their abilities in singing, dancing, and takona (body painting). In 2013, a'amu tuai and the dance ensemble competition, two of the most anticipated contests during the Tapati were removed. The dance ensemble for Tapati involves three categories, children, youth, and adults where everybody is invited to dance, even the tourists who are passing through the island, giving them the opportunity to see and learn songs, dances and how to make a Rapanui costume.

As there was no a'amu tuai and dance ensemble in Tapati 2013, Maori Tupuna decided to put together a show that included aspects of both disciplines. The group Maori Tupuna performed *Te A'amu o te Hakaara Maohi o Rapa Nui* translated as *The History of the Polynesian Rapa Nui*. Although this performance is mainly dance, music and songs, Maori Tupuna manages to integrate a few significant dramatizations within their work. Its significance is based in the fact that for the first time it was possible to see periods of the contemporary Rapanui history that are still in the memory of the community, but had never been showed before at the main venue during Tapati, and the symbolic representation of an object through the dancer's body.

*Te A'amu O Te Hakaara Maohi O Rapa Nui* (2013) showed for the first time aspects of the Rapanui history, that were kept silent in their memory, perhaps because it is a painful issue to remember openly. For example, the arrival of Peruvian slave raids and the arrival of missionaries to Rapa Nui. Performers dressed in Marines uniforms and carrying weapons entered the stage, pushing male performers to the ground. A character dressed as a priest crossed the stage with a book symbolizing the Bible. When he reached the other side of the stage he made the sign of the cross in front of a banner where the image of Rapanui God Makemake was painted (Rapu, 2013). Rapanui dancer Miriam Pakarati Gula, who was participating in the performance, expressed that this play was significant because

it showed topics that nobody talks about... everyone knows what happened, because they've talked to an elder who remembers hearing about it, or read it in a book... but another thing is to see it performed... where a distant... almost forgotten memory comes alive... it was a very emotional performance, and I think this time the message did reach the local audience (Pakarati Gula, 2014).

Such representation of historical events can serve as a healing tool, and act as a way of coming to terms with the past. So many issues in Rapanui contemporary history remain unspoken, locked away, becoming a distant memory, and performances are a way of breaking these silences and

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<sup>5</sup> In Rapanui language the word 'Maori' refers to the teacher or someone who is knowledgeable in a specific art or craft. It is written without macron.

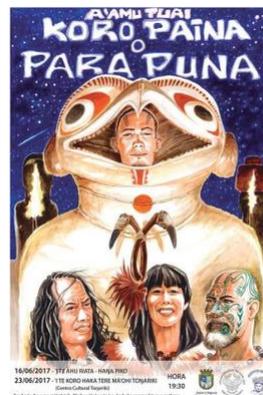
initiating conversations and reflections. Ancient stories of migration, war and heroes are told and retold; however, the relationships of Rapanui peoples with the outside world and all its influences are often silent and left unexplored.

Another significant aspect of this piece was that usually in Rapanui performances when fire, a tree, a fish, or a mōai is needed, what you see on stage is the real object. In other words, the performers light fire, ‘plant’ a tree, and freshly caught fish or a big wooden mōai are brought on stage. This time however, instead of installing a giant mōai platform on stage, the representational tool chosen was the human body. The female dancers in the front rows bent forward, creating the platform where the mōai are placed. Male dancers stood behind them in a line representing mōai that can be found around the island. The mōai is considered the aringa ora (living face) of Rapanui peoples. In this performance, representations of the ancestors were embodied by dancers, bodies as corporeal palimpsests, representing the living whakapapa (genealogy), thus giving true meaning to the expression aringa ora o te tupuna, meaning the living face of the ancestors, linking the past with the present.

The fall of mōai was also portrayed in this performance. This is a moment in the history of Rapa Nui that is not frequently shown. A section of the orally transmitted story *Kave Heke* was used as the basis for recreating the fall of the mōai. The story is about the master mōai carver Kave Heke, who teaches a young apprentice to correctly carve the neck of the mōai. At the end of the story, an old woman who had been the cook for the carvers discovers that the workers ate all the food leaving her without anything to eat. In her rage, due to the ingratitude of the workers, the old woman curses all the mōai to fall. Isabel Veriveri, one of the elders involved in the performance, enacted the character of the cook. On stage the ‘human mōai’ are standing, Veriveri delivered a very angry and full of sorrow speech in Rapanui language, bringing on stage another character representing her kuhane (spirit), and making the mōai fall (Rapu, 2013).

Theatre has become significant and valued art form in Rapanui society, because it has enabled them to show past practices that were in the memory of mostly elders. Now, and thanks to the theatre production based on these memories, contemporary Rapanui people are able to see, discuss and reflect upon past practices and customs. For example, in 2017, a group of performers, under the name of MTHI, possibly the grandchildren and nephews of the original performers created a piece about the paina ceremony, entitled *Koro Paina o Para Puna* (Figure 7).

This play portrayed the ceremony of the koro feast which took place well before the arrival of missionaries to the island in the 1860s. Any event celebrated with songs and the sharing of food with a large group of people was known as a koro (Englert, 2007: 299). Generally, a koro was organised to honour “a living father, mother, father in law or mother in law” (Metraux, 1971: 346). A koro had a choir composed of the hatu (director) and the singers, which prepared and rehearsed songs especially for the occasion.



**Fig. 7.** Poster of the performance *Koro Paina o Para Puna* (2016).

This choir consisted of a row of men called pere who were placed behind the women’s row named ihi, who painted and adorned their bodies with natural pigments using “the yellow juice of the bulb

pua, red soil called kie'a, white clay and charcoal" (Englert, 2007: 300). Nowadays, people from the Rapanui community remember having heard of a procession in which a high status person was placed on a platform and carried on the shoulders. Pamela Huke (2009), former member of Mata Tu'u Hotu Iti, believed that the name of this procession was koro paina. According to the description found in the writings of Metraux (1971), Englert (2007), and Paoa et al. (1983), the koro paina was not related to a celebration called paina which was celebrated to honour the "memory of a dead parent" (Metraux, 1971: 343), or in memory of "an important person some years after his death" (Paoa et al., 1983: 450).



**Fig. 8.** Paina site in front of Ahu Haŋa Te'e, Photograph by M. Fortin.

The paina celebration was held in a circular section built (Figure 8) in front of the ahu (platform) "where the honoured dead relative was buried" (Metraux, 1971: 344). For this event, the host commanded to build a figure, "an image that represented a tribute to the dead person" (Paoa et al., 1983: 450) that was three or four meters high. The figure consisted of a hollow head and body, so that the heva (sufferer), the host of the feast could "enter the figure and delivered a long speech" (Metraux, 1971: 345) from the mouth of the figure (see Figure 9). Pamela Huke (2009) understood this performance from the host more as a representation of the deceased's life, similar to drama than to a simple plain speech.

The significance of this play rely again on the ability of the Rapanui performers on bringing back to life customs and past practices that otherwise were only a distant memory or something they read about in an old book. This play confronted the contemporary Rapanui population with their heritage, contributing enormously in the recovery and rescue of their identity not only by delivering knowledge and art, but by educating and entertaining through the theatre.



**Fig. 9.** An artist's impression of a paina ceremony, by Te Pou Huke 2009.

## Conclusion

Throughout its historical development, Rapanui theatre practitioners have been performing 'traditional' Rapanui stories in order to preserve the Indigenous language and culture. The use of memory as a real source of information, has been fostered through its relationship with national and international colonial powers. Memory has been crucial when gathering information about a specific oral narrative, as well as costumes and old customs, bringing them back to life in contemporary Rapanui society.

The historical development of Rapanui theatre can be divided in two periods - before and after Mata Tu'ū Hotu Iti- a group that emerged in response to social, political and economic injustices that Rapanui people had to endure during the colonial era. This theatre company applied principles of self-determination in the production of each play. Through the representations of 'traditional' Rapanui stories, MTHI showed a clear difference between the Chilean and the Rapanui culture. The group determined what stories to tell, how and where.

Through theatre this theatre troupe group revitalized not only the use of the language, but the Rapanui culture itself, empowering them to tell the stories from their own perspectives. For example, the performance created by Maori Tupuna in 2013 that showed on stage different issues of the contemporary history of Rapa Nui that were left unspoken. The representation of historical events served in this case as a healing tool, a way of coming to terms with the past. Theatre can be a way of breaking these silences and initiating conversations and reflections, regarding the contemporary Rapanui history that have remained unspoken, and locked away.

This self-determination also helped to frame and shape how theatre is performed within the educational system. Especially important are the theatre productions performed at Mahana O Te Re'o, where students can practice the use of 'traditional' Rapanui language alongside its contemporary version, as it was the case of Hetereki 'a Rau Nui. These performances help the maintenance of oral narratives, different performing arts and customs alive. They bring the past back to present, allowing the transmission of knowledge between generations, changing its status from a distant memory to a contemporary activity.

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### Author's biography

Dr. Moira Fortin Cornejo is an actress of Chilean heritage who lived in Rapa Nui for more than ten years. She has vast experience performing, as well as conducting drama workshops within the educational system in Rapa Nui. In 2016 she finished her PhD trilingually entitled “Tensions and Possibilities: The Interplay of ‘Traditional’ Cultural Elements and the Creation of ‘Contemporary’ Rapanui, Māori, and Samoan diasporic Theatre [He Moto, He Koa: Te Haka-piri o te Haka Ara e te Api ki te Aha o te Aamu Api ki Rapa Nui, Māori e ko Sāmoa; Tensiones y Posibilidades: La Integración de Elementos Culturales ‘Tradicionales’ en la Creación ‘Contemporánea’ de Teatro Rapanui, Māori, y diasporico Samoano]. Currently, Dr. Fortin is a lecturer at the Department of Languages and Cultures at the University of Otago in Dunedin, Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

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