



Edwards, Edmundo
and Alexandra
Edwards. *When the
Universe was an Island.
Exploring the Cultural
and Spiritual Cosmos of
Ancient Rapa Nui*

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Review by Georgia Lee,
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When the Universe was an Island... is not intended as a guide for the first-time or casual visitor to Rapa Nui who is planning a trip to the island to surf and hang out. This is heavy stuff. And, to my knowledge, there is no other book about Easter Island that incorporates the material that Edmundo Edwards and his daughter, Alexandra Edwards, have collected here. It is a gold mine of esoteric information.

I first met Edmundo Edwards in the 1980s when I was working on Rapa Nui and, in fact, I (with my university teams) lived at his adopted family's *pensión*. He talked about his plans for this book at that time, and he was actively thinking about and gathering material for it. Decades went by and then, *voilà!* At long last, the opus has arrived, and along with it, great memories of rainy days when we all sat around the kitchen table with a bottle of cheap Chilean wine and talked about the island, various ideas, and opinions. At that time, word had just been received that Routledge's unpublished field notes from 1914-15 had been discovered and we agonized about how to get our hands on such a valuable resource.

Edwards managed to access Routledge's notes and they became a vital part of this book, as did interviews with the island's elders, collected by Edwards himself during decades of living on the island. The reader will not hear lurid tales of islanders destroying their habitat in *When the Universe was an Island*, but about the gods of Polynesia, the ancient rituals of those who settled Rapa Nui, the cycle of life, and those pesky *aku-aku* from the world of the spirits. We learn of the importance of the stars in the heavens, of cargo cults, nature spirits, and deified ancestors – the meaning of life on Rapa Nui. We learn of social organization, connections with the rest of Polynesia, the names of men who became birdmen, and the priests and kings.

Aside from living and working on Rapa Nui since 1960, Edwards has conducted archaeological studies in the Marquesas Islands and in Tahiti, as well as in the

Austral Islands. He thus has an in-depth background for making comparisons between the many isolated island cultures of the Pacific.

Chapter 1, "The Origin of the Polynesians," covers Lapita origins, navigators and sailing technology, and how the early explorers traveled eastward bringing with them plants and animals, and gradually populated uninhabited islands – and how they became Polynesian in the process.

Chapter 2, "The Birth of Rapa Nui: Natural Surroundings v/s Human Expansion," covers the flora and fauna of Rapa Nui and climate change. Here, the authors discuss the impact of humans and deforestation, invasive plants, and those controversial rats.

Chapter 3, "From the Nothing to the Thought: Rapanui Religion and Cosmography," deals with the cycle of life, the major gods, family gods, spirits, and deified ancestors. Much food for thought here!

Chapter 4, "Family Business: Rapanui Social and Political Organization," discusses the *ariki* and the social and political system, settlement patterns, clan and family ties, clan origins, and territories.

Chapter 5, Parts I, II and III: "Five-Star Cuisine: Rapanui Ethnoastronomy and the Agricultural Cycle." Here, the authors describe (in Part I) sky-watching, astronomically-oriented structures, the lunar calendar, and Rapanui astronomy. Part II includes the seasons, agriculture cycles, and rituals for increasing crops, the seasonal opening of deep-sea fishing, *tapu* and *rahui*. Part III deals with the Practical vs. the Supernatural in Rapanui Archaeoastronomy. Thus, Chapter 5, which contains 55 pages, is amazing in its depth of information. As the authors state, "Polynesians believed most stars had been placed in the sky by the gods endeavouring to guide and please humans" (p. 181). Sections in this chapter include astronomical observations and *pipi horeko*, *tupa*, astronomical observatories on Poike and at Ra'ai, and ceremonial structures that are oriented to the stars and the lunar calendar.

Chapter 6, Parts I, II, and III. In the first two parts, "The Meaning of Life: A Rapanui Perspective" deals with life cycles from pregnancy and birth to death and the afterlife, and includes material on tattoo, illness, disease, murder, suicide, and sacrifice as well as life celebrations ranging from procreation to death and festivities to honor the recently departed. Part III discusses "being Rapanui" and how the ancestors still today continue to affect the living.

Chapter 7, "Temples and Gods of Stone: The Rapanui *Ahu* and *Moai*," is divided into three sections: 1) Sacred Structures, including dates and symbolism of excavated *moai*; 2) *Moai* statues and *Aringa Ora*, which includes names of master carvers, the quarry and the meaning of the statues' features, and moving the statues; 3) The Polynesian Connection, which discusses where else in Polynesia

similar statues are to be found, which suggests inter-island communication with them.

Chapter 8, "To the Ends of the Earth and Back: The Rapanui Birdman Cult," describes and discusses the Birdman Cult, its origins, the competition, the search for the sacred egg, and the victory of the *hopu manu*. There is a section regarding migratory birds and the god Make Make, the priests who officiated at the ceremonies, Mataveri and 'Orongo, the famous statue Hoa Hakananai'a (now in the British Museum) and the life of the winning birdman following his becoming Tangata Manu, and finally, the end of the cult competitions in 1879. A list of winners is provided, including the winner's clan affiliation.

Chapter 9, "The Rapanui Continuum" is the conclusion, and the book ends by giving notice to one and all that the Rapanui still exist, and extended families still are at the center of island life today. While they have adjusted to changing realities, strong connections with old traditions and beliefs are maintained. The Rapanui are not just survivors—they stand tall and proud as a unifying force within the society. This chapter discusses early politics, epidemics, the establishment of the sheep ranch and Catholicism, the messianic revolution, and the search for cultural identity. Included in this chapter is the arrival of *Hökūle'a* in 1999, closing the Polynesian triangle.

Chapter 10, "Bookends: Full Circle" contains eight appendices: 1) The *akuaku*; 5 pages that list their names, attributes, residence, and source; 2) The Rapanui Sky explained; 3) Culture and Cults, Rapa Nui in 1770; 4) The incipient Rapanui Cargo Cult and the *Hare o te Atua* ceremonies; 5) 'Orongo houses, their names and owners; 6) Ritual gathering of sooty terns on Motu Nui; 7) The *tangata manu*: chronology and names of the year, plus clan and lineage; and 8) Clans that had surviving birdmen living in Orohie, Hanga Ho'onu, 'Anakena, Tongariki, and Ovahe.

Next is a glossary of Rapanui Words (18 pages), and then Local Ethnographic Sources, consisting of eleven pages that read like a "who's who" on Rapa Nui. Which ethnographer the various islanders worked with is listed, many going back to Thomson in 1886 and Routledge in 1914.

When the Universe was an Island, Exploring the Cultural and Spiritual Cosmos of Ancient Rapa Nui is a tour-de-force that belongs in the library of all serious students of the past culture and lifestyle of the Rapanui. Highly recommended.
Maururu, Edmundo and Alexandra!