The Term *mo‘ai* as a Key to the Idea Behind the Phenomenon

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To speak about Rapa Nui is absolutely impossible without referring to the most spectacular feature of its culture, the gigantic stone statues or *moai*, as they are commonly termed now. They fascinated not only the first Europeans who saw them in 1722 and all subsequent visitors, but also absorb most attention, imagination and effort in every respect up to this day. Their spectacular size, technical achievement and artistic style and standard justify, beyond the least doubt, the attention paid to them. On the other hand, the almost exclusive devotion of means and energy to the problems of the making, lifting and transport of the big stone statues led to an overemphasis on archaeology and an understandable if lamentable propensity towards the solution of mere technicalities. This still prevailing tendency, however justified it may be or appear, hindered discoverers, adventurers, settlers and even investigators from paying the same or, at least, half as much attention to the whole range of other, just as important aspects of Rapa Nui culture. Apart from all other adverse circumstances, it was and still is that obtrusive, all-eclipsing omnipresence of the *moai* and their inherent technical problematic which left many important questions unasked and, consequently, unanswered. This is the situation up to this day and will presumably, at least with regard to certain ethnological matters, remain so.

One of the questions would have been and still is the one as to the meaning of the term *mo‘ai* which is completely ignored by the present-day islanders. As a matter of fact, no one bothers to know, and if a nosy stranger asks the question, the only answer he might get is that the word *moai* is a contraction of *mo* = “for” and *‘ai* = “who”, meaning “for whom”. It is a joking answer, of course, representing a folk etymology and suggesting the conversion of this interrogative pronoun into a generic term for statues or sculptures.

Before entering into a thorough discussion of the possible morphology, semantics and derivation of the term *mo‘ai*, we propose to present the available evidence. The term *moai* appears to be restricted to Rapa Nui alone. Words of other Polynesian languages, which look cognate or identical turn out to be semasiologically incompatible. Thus, according to Barthel, the Hawaiian *moa‘ai* meaning “bending over, arching, as a tree” and the allegedly “transposed” Rotuman *ma‘oi* meaning “many”, “numerous” and, in compounds, “big”, “very large” do “not turn up any clues” (Barthel 1978:275; cf. Pukui & Elbert 1986:249; Churchward 1940:236, 307, 350), and to these two the Māori *moai* meaning “peaceful, quiet” and “become moist, water”, “smooth or calm, as the sea”, “solitary, desolate”, “gentle” (Tregear 1891:245); Williams 1971:204, 212) may be added.

The Rapa Nui lexical evidence in its chronological order shows the following picture. The two editions of Roussel’s vocabulary do not list *mo‘ai* at all. In 1908 Roussel gives under the entries of “statue”, “idole”, “image sculptuée” and “relief” and in 1917 under those of “estatua”, “idolo” and “relieve” the Rapa Nui correspondence *mohai* (Roussel 1908:19, 27, 51, 78, 85; 1917:69, 89, 149). Churchill, who depends on Roussel, renders *mohai*, which he equates with Thomson’s “*moai*” and Geiseler’s “*moi*”, identically (Churchill 1912:230; cf. Thomson 1981:541; Geiseler 1983:17, 32). While Englert has neither of these three forms in his dictionary, Fuentes lists “*moai*” defining it as “sculpture, statue” which, he says, could be of stone = *ma‘ea* or wood = *maio* (Fuentes 1960:792).

Up to this point we have three different forms of the term. “*Moai*” is the most common of them both in the literature and in the active use of the present-day islanders. Englert appears to be the only author who, in his 1939 collection of texts, entitled *He Huru o Rapanui*, favors, the glottalized variant, *mo‘ai*, which he abandons later for the unglottalized *moai* without commenting on his motives. The first impulse one feels in view of such a variety of forms is to reduce them by eliminating those which are obviously or most probably wrong. Except for Geiseler, neither the literature on Rapa Nui nor the everyday speech of the islanders know the form *moi*, *mo‘i* or *mo‘i*. There is an Hawaiian word, *mo‘i*, rendered by Pukui and Elbert as “king, sovereign, monarch, majesty, ruler, queen” and said to be “perhaps related to ‘i, supreme”. Referring to Malo, the same source gives also “temple image” and “lord of images”, where Malo himself speaks of idols. With reference to Fornander the dictionary goes on to say that *mo‘i* designated “according to Kepelino and Kamakau, a rank of chiefs, who could succeed to the government but who were of lower rank than chiefs descended from the god Kane” (Pukui & Elbert 1986:251). Unless there was a Rapa Nui word which was phonologically and semantically cognate with the Hawaiian *moi* but which is now lost, the form given by Geiseler appears to be either due to a hearing or spelling error or is simply a misprint. If Geiseler knew the Hawaiian term, something which we do not know, he might also have confounded it with the Rapa Nui term for sculptures. Whatever the case may be, the form of the term given by him remains unconfirmed, and we feel fully justified in dismissing it from our further consideration. Of the remaining three forms the most common but also the most mysterious one is *moai*. As already mentioned, it appears to have no cognates in the rest of Polynesia and there is no explanation of it on Rapa Nui itself.

To the best of our knowledge Brown and Barthel are the only authors who have made serious attempts to analyze and interpret the term *moai* morphologically and semantically. Brown has the following to say:

“the name for the statues (*moai*) has not found any satisfactory etymology; perhaps the Eastern Polynesian word ‘*moai*‘ ‘sacred’ and the common Polynesian root *i* for ‘ancestry’, the basis of ‘‘i’ might furnish explanation of their purpose, ‘sacred to ancestors’ (Brown 1924:131; cf. 278; Barthel 1978:275ff). Barthel (1978:276) suspects ‘that the name of the anthropomorphic figures (*moai*) was based on their function and
comes from *mo ai*, which means, "for the progeny, for the descendants". The name seems to sum up the basic function of the statues of the ancestors.

Here we have an example of how careful one ought to be when analyzing Polynesian words. While Brown (1924:131) suggests that *moai* is *mo* plus *ai* meaning "sacred to ancestors", Barthel (1978:276) suspects it to be *mo* plus *ai* signifying "for the descendants". According to where the word is broken up, such adverse genealogical concepts like ancestry and progeny appear to be involved. Brown’s analysis, however, is not convincing at all. His approach is morphologically untenable because the Eastern Polynesian word for “sacred” is, according to what we always heard in Tahiti and what Blixen and Lemaitre confirm, *mo’a* but not *moai*. And we are quite confident that this was also true for the now obsolete Marquesan and Hawaiian word *mo’a* with the same meaning, listed by Mosblech as *moa*. Blixen (1972:13; Lemaitre 1973:78; Mosblech 1843:68) identifies the Rapa Nui *mo’a* as a borrowing from the Tahitian. This being so and under the condition that *i* may be interpreted as the basic vowel of *ivi* denoting “ancestry”, the Rapa Nui term with the suggested meaning “sacred to ancestors” should read *mo’ai* but not *moai*.

Much more plausible is Barthel’s solution. In fact, the Rapa Nui *mo* or *ma* mean “for” and derive from the PPN *mo'o* or *ma'a* with an identical meaning. The rendering of the term *moai* as “for the progeny, for the descendants” gains plausibility comparing it morphologically with the Rapa Nui *hua'ai* denoting “family, generation, succession of descendants”, which Blixen supposes to be a borrowing from the Tahitian coinciding with *hau'a'i* which means “seed, progeny” (Puentes 1960:745; Davies 1851:111; cf. Blixen 1972:12). However, unlike Blixen, we are not too certain about the Rapa Nui *hua'ai* having been borrowed from the Tahitian. It is true that the Rapa Nui word *'ai* = “to copulate” may be derived from the PPN *'ai* meaning the same and having reflexes in many parts of Polynesia (Biggs 1979). The Rapa Nui compound *hua'ai* signifying literally “fruit of copulation”, i.e. “progeny” makes sense. The Tahitian *hua'ai*, on the other hand, is a compound of *hua'a* for “family, lineage, ancestry” (Davies 1851:111) and the unglottalized *ai* as the Tahitian reflex of the PPN *'ai*. If the Rapa Nui *hua'ai* were a borrowing from the Tahitian *hua'ai*, the heavy modifications are obvious and should not be skipped over in silence. However, if the analogy to *hua'ai* were valid or tenable, the term here under consideration should also be glottalized and read *mo'ai* instead of *moai*.

Another possibility to explain the term *mo'ai*, not *moai*, is provided by Dordillon (1904:189; 1931:268) from the Marquesas. He lists *mokai* meaning “puissant, qui a du pouvoir” or “qui prend beaucoup de poisson”, in combinations like *vaka, 'upeka* (*opena, 'upe'a*) *mokai* “pirogue, filet qui prend beaucoup de poisson”, i.e. boat or net which is efficient at fishing. The phonetics of this word identifies it as a northwestern Marquesan one, while its southeastern equivalent, *'mo'ai*, which surely existed, is not registered. Given the strong connection between the Marquesas and Rapa Nui, this evidence could well be explanatory for the Rapa Nui statuses making reference to their power or *mana*. The homonymous Marquesan word *moai* signifying “salle, crosseux, couvert de boue” or “tache”, on the other hand, does not seem to be helpful at all in this case because of its negative semantics. On account of semantical incompatibility the Māori word *mokai* which coincides with the northwestern Marquesan *mokai*, but which denotes “a captive, a slave” and “an animal kept as a pet” (Tregear 1891:248) may, as far as we are concerned, also be disregarded in our particular context.

In order not to miss out on one, perhaps illuminating explanation of the Rapa Nui *mo'ai*, the possible Tahitian cognates *ma'o'i* or *mo'o'i* should not be omitted. The first is said to mean “attainable, moveable” (Davis 1851:132) and associated with *mana'a*, *mane'e* and *mara'a* all signifying “manageable, moveable, portable” (ibid:129f, 133). The variant *mo'o'i*, again, signifies “manageable” (ibid:146). If one of these were the root of the Rapa Nui term here in question, the giant stone statues received their name because of the technically important detail that they could be moved or carried, but not for any religious reason. Although this appears possible, we are inclined to think that the term *mo'ai* is rather explanatory in the ideological than in the technical sense.

Finally, however, we should not neglect the fact that Roussel has *mo'ai*, the correctness of which is not questioned by Churchill. Notwithstanding the faultiness and shortcomings of the Rapa Nui dictionaries in general and of Roussel’s vocabularies in particular, the *h* might be justified in this case.

The simplest way of dealing with this form is to suspect an error of Roussel’s. As a Frenchman he was not unlikely to have problems with the perception, pronunciation and, consequently, the proper application of the *h* and the glottal stop in Polynesian languages, as several authors remarked with regard to Frenchmen in general (Gaussin 1853:33; Laval 1938:XXVI; Stimson 1958:45). It could also be that he perceived the Rapa Nui glottal stop and represented it by *h*, as his missionary brethren regularly did in Mangarevan (Laval 1938:XXVff; Buck 1938:11ff; Langdon & Tryon 1983:68 n.76), a habit with which he must have been familiar. In this case the *h* would have to be replaced with an apostrophe or hamza, converting *mo'ai* into *mo'ai* again. On the other hand, Roussel was an experienced missionary who, in addition to his five years on Rapa Nui, had previously spent over 10 years in the Marquesas, Tuamotus and Mangareva where he returned for the last 27 years of his life in 1871, and was familiar with the phonetics and orthography of at least four Polynesian languages. But, since neither Roussel himself nor anybody else comments on the matter, these explanations cannot be but more or less justified conjectures.

However, the possibility that the Rapa Nui statues were originally called *mohai* instead of *mo'ai* or *moai* should not be discarded inconsiderately from the discussion. As far as we can see, there are two possible morphological and semantical correspondences or cognates, the Hawaiian *mōhai* and the Tahitian *mahoi* or *mehoi*. The Hawaiian *mōhai* denoting “sacrifice, offering; to offer a sacrifice” (Pukui & Elbert 1986:250) is said to be a compound of the prefix *mō* and the common variation of *māi*—”indicating quality or state” (ibid:248) and *hai* which itself is said to mean “offering, sacrifice; to offer, sacrifice” and to derive from the PNP *fai*. 
Hau, again, is supposed to be synonymous with he'i meaning "to sacrifice", both being contained in the Hawaiian haiau or heiau denoting a "pre-Christian place of worship, shrine" (ibid:47, 64). In case the Hawaiian mohe'i and the Rapa Nui mohai could be established as being cognate, it might be argued that the statues received the name of mohe'i either because sacrifices were offered to those whom they represented or because they themselves were the result of sacrificial efforts, and hence epitomes of sacrifice.

The Tahitian mohe'i signifying "the essence, or soul of a god" and mohe'o denoting "the substance of an image representing a god; the power and dignity of a god" (Davies 1851:125, 142; cf. Jaussen 1949:146, 151), although phonetically less close to the Rapa Nui mohai, would approximate the latter semantically to the above treated mokari of Nuku Hiva or *mo'au of Hiva 'Oa. For Takoto and Vahitahi of the Tuamotus hoi is rendered as "to appear, show oneself; as an apparition, god", and the sub-entry, mahoi, is said to denote "a ghost, apparition of the dead; as an ancestor" who "appears only in one's sleep or dreams", and "the mind" or, frequently, "the spirit, soul". These meanings of mahoi are confirmed by Tregear who, in addition, gives the form mahehoi (Stimson & Marshall 1964:151; Tregear 1894:118). The relationship between the eidos which is the "essence", "substance", "power and dignity of a god" and the phenomenon which is the "god's" material manifestation is modeled after the metonymical formula of pars pro toto: This is clearly expressed by Teiera Henry who described the invocation of the moheio of "gods" and "demons" into their abodes, i.e. the Tahitian "images", especially manufactured for this purpose. The "magicians", called feia tahutahu or 'orou "invoked to enter their respective images the moheio (presence) of demons, called vava'u 'ino, and of malevolent disembodied spirits of ancient fame, called 'oromatau 'ai aru (devouring ghosts of darkness) or 'oromātea niho rōra (ghosts with long teeth), after which the images were named". The tahu'a or so-called priests... learned to recite without hesitancy... 'upu fa'a'aura i te mehoi o te atua, invocation to inspire—idols or other objects—with the dignity of the gods.

The fact that the manufactured objects, or images which served as the abodes of the numinous beings invoked to inspire or "sanctify" them through their "presence" were but the phenomena, i.e. the material manifestations, and distinct from the eidos, i.e. the numinous beings themselves, identifies this setting as fetishism in its ordinary, systematic, religious sense. According to Webster's New International Dictionary (1958:937 f) "The fetish is regarded as the abode, sometimes temporary, of a supernatural spirit or power, and gains its potency from the indwelling of that spirit". The English form of the term derives from the French fétiche which, again, is based on the Portuguese adjective fésitico meaning "artificial" from Latin facticius signifying "made by art, artificial, factitious". Applied to the Tahitian situation it means that the numinous beings, atua, 'oromātea, vāvā, etc. were conceived of as separate entities from their materialization, abodes or images, termed, according to Oliver, only to'o but, according to Henry, also ata, as in Samoa and elsewhere in Polynesia. Oliver remarks: "to'o was the generic name for a type of fabricated and more or less anthropomorphic "image" into which an atua's presence (meho'i) was occasionally invoked when it became necessary to communicate with it. In contrast an atua was a natural object or being... according to Henry, however, the term also signified anything animate or inanimate that was regarded as "... an incarnation of a god that had been duly invoked to enter it"... the list of atua given by her includes all three of the types of atua-manifestations distinguished above—that is, atua in their "natural" forms, occasional atua transformations, and atua mediums - as well as ghosts.

To end this discussion of fetishism, Handy's observations on the concepts of ti'i (tiki), to'o (toko) and ata must not be omitted because they confirm what has just been quoted. He says:

'Tiki was applied more particularly to the figures carved in human and animal form representing gods of lesser magnitude -- group, family, and individual patrons. The word tiki never means image, an idea that was expressed in the old dialect by quite another word, atua. In modern usage tiki signifies figure, design. Falling back again on the old mythology as a guide to original meanings, apparently in the beginning the word meant symbol... or figure or design representing a procreating human progenitor... The word toko was applied in New Zealand to the miniature "god sticks" representing the major deities. In Tahiti the corresponding term to'o designated post-like figures or smaller semit-covered stakes that represented or were emblematic of the greater gods... When invoked, the patron spirit was evidently supposed to descend into the figure representing him in much the same way as a spirit was believed to enter into the body of a prophet and possess him. In the Marquesas the native phrase used to describe the entry of a god into his human vessel was ha'atopa te atua (to cause the god to fall)... In Tahiti, an identical conception, fa'a'ahu (to cause to descend) signified a rite for inducing the descent of a deity into his representation" (Handy 1927:121f; cf. 1923:265).

Ellis reports of his conversations with a tahu'a tarai to'o or "maker of gods" on the island of Ra'aitua: "I was anxious to know his own opinion as to the idols it had been his business to make,—whether he really believed they were the powerful beings which the natives supposed; and if so, what constituted their great power over the other parts of the tree from which they were hewn?... It was not, he said, from the alteration his tools had effected in the appearance of the wood, or the carving with which they were ornamented, but because they had been taken to the temple, and were filled with the atua, that they became so powerful" (Ellis 1969 1:337f.).

We still add what Moerenhout has to say on the matter: "Les To'os étaient lea images des Atua. Ces images... se conservaient avec le plus grand soin dans les Maraes. Les images des Atua étaient travaillées avec bien
moins de soin que celles des Ti'i's, leurs inférieurs, dont quelques-uns comme gardiens, devaient se trouver autour des temples. La raison en est que les images n'étaient pas les vrais émblèmes de la divinité... elles n'étaient que le tabernacle où se déposait ce qui représentait partout les dieux” (Moerenhout 1837:471)

The ti'i of Ra'ivavae, which Moerenhout reports to have been almost as colossal as the Rapa Nui mo'a'i, are defined by Stimson and Marshall as stone images of which they say “these usually were representations of the gods, worshipped by the people during rites on the marae; the spirit of the god invoked by the ‘ara'a temporarily entered into the image”.

Regardless whether the to'o (toko), ti'i (tiki) and ata were or were not strictly distinguished either qualitatively or quantitatively or both and whether the to'o and ti'i were manufactured objects, whereas the ata were animals or natural objects, they themselves were not worshipped but fabricated or chosen to serve as images, symbols, abodes or tabernacles into which the presence (mahoi, mohoi) of numina was invoked. In fulfilling the function of representing, manifesting, embodying or containing the numinous beings, their presence, essence, substance or power (mana) categorizes them as fetishes and the reverential regard paid to them constitutes pretty clearly what history of religion has established as fetishism. But, although there is a clear-cut distinction between the image and the imagined, the symbol and the symbolized, the abode and the abiding, the embodiment and the embodied, the container and the content, i.e. the phenomenon and the eidos as two different entities, either in religious practice or, at any rate, in scholarly discourse these separate entities are easily confused and their distinctiveness is often obscured.

There is no proof and not the slightest hint of a common or an individual etymology of these terms — the Rapa Nui mohai or mo'ai, the Marquesan mokai and *mo'ai, the Tahitian mahoi and mohoi, and the Tuamotuan ho'i and mahoi — from an older linguistic stratum. However, we are inclined to believe in the probability that the Western Polynesian mafai might be cognate with all of them.

This word, which mostly serves as auxiliary verb, expresses everywhere ability, capability, potency, possibility, feasibility, and thus originally connotes and still implies power or might as it was attributed by the Polynesians to their ancestors and the material representations of these, including the Rapa Nui mohai or rather mo'ai.

In conclusion it must be admitted that the foregoing attempts to provide plausible linguistic explanations or interpretations of this important Rapa Nui term are based on the scarce and unreliable lexical evidence from the empirical Polynesian languages and are bound to be somewhat speculative. The lack of an established hierarchy of words in Polynesian languages as stated with some regret by Krupa (1982:156f.), the lack of historical depth, unreliable morphology, and chaotic phonology do not allow us to be more precise in this particular case. One result, however, appears to be certain. The original and therefore most correct form of the denomination of the Rapa Nui statues or sculptures is most probably mo'ai, possibly mohai, but not maoi, as generally accepted now.

Footnotes

1 According to Pukui & Elbert 1986:251, Stokes thought that mo'ai was a recent word, first printed in 1832. Cf. Malo 1951:162, 165, 173; Forminder 1919 VI: 266; Mosblech 1843:69; Andrews 1865:395.


4 Henry 1928:154 f; Tahu ‘a = “priest, skilled artificer, mechanic, doctor”; Andrews 1944:148; cf. Davies 1851:243; “guérisseur”; Lemaître 1973:114; Muhu = “noise, the din of talking; to make a noise or din”, Davies 1851:148; Fare = “house”, Davies 1851:81; Lemaître 1973:52. ‘Aira’a = absorision, Oliver 1974 II:871; cf. a‘iraga = “the act of eating”, Stimson & Marshall MS:554. ’Upu = (obs.) “pray, a set of prayers addressed to the gods by the priest and others, also a prayer addressed by the sorcerers to their ti’is or demons, for some evil purpose; to repeat such an ‘upu or prayer”, Davies 1851:302.


6 Oliver 1974 I: 58 f; Cf. Henry 1928:382 ff; Davies 1851: 41; Andrews 1944: 22. For to'o cf. Davies 1851: 279 “a piece of wood forming the body of an idol”; Andrews 1944: 172 “ancient sacred sticks; Godsticks”.

Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPN</th>
<th>*mafai</th>
<th>Ranby 1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuvalu</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>be able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanumea, Tuvalu</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>able; permitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokelau</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>be able to, can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>(can), (be) able to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East 'Uvea, Wallis Islands</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>feasible, to happen, (be)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Futuna, Wallis Islands</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>(can), (be) able, capable,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonga</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>able, capable, ability, legal power, authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niue</td>
<td>mafai</td>
<td>to be able, to be willing (usually used in negative)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vol 11 (3) September 1997

Rapa Nui Journal
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