

# Petroglyphs and Legends of Rapa Nui

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Societal tensions are expressed in legends and myths. On Rapa Nui, we find many legends that focus on warfare and vengeance; even the offshore islets are said to have taken their position after quarreling with one another (Métraux 1971:389). Poignant (1967:69) notes that anxieties and fears reflected the facts of life on this stress-ridden island, and that myths are also linked with the land. "Named locations" often were described in detail in order to establish territorial claims.

As the Polynesians moved from island to island, knowledge of mythical events went along with them. Then, in isolation, each group adapted the old stories to suit their present reality and new elements were absorbed into the legends. Many Polynesian societies contain legends about beings that are half-fish and half-man, and a Manganian (Cook Islands) legend describes a love-sick maiden who traveled to her lover on the backs of sharks. She then was visited by her brother in the form of a pigeon, and he carried her back home on his wings (Poignant 1967:31, 51). Some of the most popular legends tell of characters with supernatural powers, such as the ability to transform themselves into other creatures.

It is, however, the rare legend that can be connected to a petroglyph site. Of all the many of panels of petroglyphs on Easter Island, there are legends for only a very few. Thus it is important to preserve the knowledge of them, and we can but lament the loss of others. I am grateful to the islanders who shared these legends with me and who worked with my petroglyph documentation project over the years: Keremo Ika, who was instrumental in acquiring the legends as well as helping to find them in the field; Raul Paoa; Kihī Haoa Cardinali; Leonardo Pakarati; and Felipe Teao. Several UREP participants assisted with documentation, with thanks in particular to Curtiss Johnson.

## A MAGICAL VISIT TO SÁLAS Y GÓMEZ

Sálas y Gómez lies 413 miles east of Rapa Nui and was declared a National Monument (*Santuarios de la Naturaleza*) in 1976. Latitude 26° 25' 27" S, longitude 105° 21' 55" W. This island has the distinction of being named after two explorers: a Spanish pilot, José Sálas Valdés, who discovered it on 23 August 1793, and a Spanish captain and pilot, José Manuel Gómez of the frigate *Victor* who rediscovered it on 18 or 19 October 1805. Sálas y Gómez has millions of sea birds and the waters around it teem with fish, but few humans ever set foot here.

A more unlikely spot is hard to imagine. Sálas y Gómez is a barren ¾ mile long rock—the top of a volcanic peak that only rises 100 feet above sea level. The only vegetation is a fern, *asplenium*, growing in natural depressions that catch

rainwater. And yet legends on Easter Island tell of the god Makemake who arrived in the disguise of a turtle and carried an islander on his back to that "beautiful island," Motu Motero Hiva. The description of Sálas y Gómez as a beautiful place is ample proof that the legend is just that—there seems to have been no actual knowledge of the place

In 1805, Amasa and Samuel Delano of the ship *Perserverance* sighted Sálas y Gómez and named it Pilgrim Island. They were searching for seals for the fur trade. Unable to land due to high surf, they were able to observe birds and great numbers of sharks. They tried for three days to go ashore but finally gave up and sailed on. They noted driftwood, some in large pieces, and supposed it to be the ruins of a ship that had been wrecked there.

The naturalist and German poet, Adalbert von Chamisso came here in 1816 on the Russian ship *Rurik*, and did manage to disembark. To his astonishment he found a dying man; one day sooner and they might have been able to save him. Both his identity and the story of how he came to be here died with him. Chamisso wrote: "It makes one shudder to imagine the possibility that a human being could be cast ashore alive on it, for the eggs of the waterfowl could have sufficed to lengthen his forsaken existence all too much upon this bare, sunburned piece of stone between sea and sky."

Let us now look at the legend of Makemake who appeared to an islander in the guise of a turtle, and a petroglyph site on Easter Island that is said to commemorate a magical visit to Sálas y Gómez.

## THE LEGEND OF MOA PARA'S TURTLE AND THE TUNA OF HERA.

The petroglyphs associated with this legend are located at Omohe, on the northwest coast of Easter Island (Figure 1), on sections of flat lava flow. The two rock art panels are close together, near the edge of a cliff. One has a simple large turtle (Figure 2); the other has many elements including turtle, tuna,

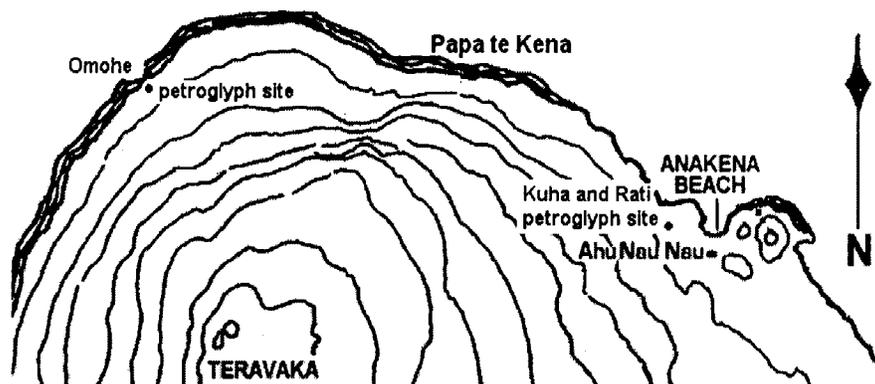


Figure 1. Map of north portion of Easter Island showing locations of the two petroglyph sites. Neither are accessible by roads.

faces, outline shapes of *hare paenga* (boat house foundations), and a few *komari* (vulva forms) (Figure 3) (Lee 1992:Figures 4.69 and 4.70).

### The Legend

Moa Para lived at Taha Taha O Ruhi, beside Ahu Mahatua. He was a great fisherman and a famous carver of statues. But he had become weary and passed his days dreaming about traveling to other places and meeting new people. One day, while he was deep in thought, a wave cast up on the shore a spirit in the form of a turtle. The spirit/turtle said, "Moa Para, why are you sad? Are you dreaming of other places?" Moa Para replied, "How I would like to know other places and travel like the wind!" At this, the turtle offered to take him on his back to another island: "Only climb on my back and we will travel together." So Moa Para climbed onto the back of the turtle and said, "I am ready; take me where you wish."

After a time they came to an island called Motu Matiro Hiva (Sálas y Gómez). The spirit said, "This place is Motu Matiro Hiva. It is beautiful. I will leave you here and return to Te Pito O te Henua and if some day you want to return, only call my name, Makemake."

The spirit returned to Te Pito O te Henua and many years passed. Moa Para became bored and tired of being alone and he called to the spirit, "*E Makemake ka oho ko mai koe kia au ka ma'u atu ki te kainga.*" [Makemake, return and look for me, I wish to return to my homeland.]

And soon the turtle appeared and said, "I could hear you all the way from Te Pito te Henua." Moa Para climbed onto the turtle's back and they returned. The moment they came to Hanga Haka Ia at Omohe, many people ran to the shoreline to see the amazing sight of a man on the back of a turtle. Among the group was a famous fisherman and sculptor of high rank who said to Moa Para, "Why have you come on this turtle?" Moa Para answered, "It took me to Motu Matiro Hiva and brought me back. But it is Makemake, god of all the fish, the birds, the wind, and all." At this the turtle disappeared into the water.

Moa Para asked the man his name, and the reply was "Hera." Then Hera called out to the crowd to bring food for Moa Para, including the great tuna he caught that day and ordered the crowd to make a large *umu* for celebrate the return of Moa Para. So a celebration was held to remember the visit of the god Makemake in the form of a turtle.

Hera invited Moa Para to stay with him at Omohe and said, "I will sculpt for you a tuna as a reminder and as a gift to the great god that brought you." And Moa Para replied, "I will sculpt for you two turtles as a reminder of the god Makemake and my trip to Motu Matiro Hiva." So the two made their carvings and lived together as good friends for many years until the end of their lives.

Today the panels of petroglyphs lie in the empty reaches of the northwest coast, partly obscured in high grass. Although seldom visited by tourists, they have suffered from weathering as well as damage from the hoofs of cattle and horses. The head of one turtle has been lost due to exfoliation of the rock surface,

but it was intact when Lavachery (1939:Figure 13) visited and sketched the petroglyph prior to that damage.

The single turtle image (Figure 2) has the shell indicated in double outline; the panel with a turtle and tuna is far more elaborate with numerous designs, crowded into every possible space. The turtle at the second loci has *makemake* faces on its back, inside the body of the tuna, and all around both figures. The faces are interspersed with *hare paenga* outlines and *komari*.

The image of *hare paenga* is an interesting one in the island's rock art. Although the actual stone house foundations are found all over the island and signified status dwellings, petroglyphs showing *hare paenga* are limited to one part of the island. One of these is the Omohe location where 92% of the total (39 examples) are to be found (Figure 3). A second site, Kahu Ma Hau (near the former leper sanitarium) has three examples, and a site called Hereke, on the way to Omohe, has one. Why this motif is so localized is not known; perhaps it was a clan marker. Lavachery (1935) suggests that all the motifs at Omohe related to fertility, but it is difficult to fit a house foundation in a fertility category.

*Komari* (vulva forms) constitute the most prevalent image in the island's rock art: 564 have been documented (Lee 1992) and it is likely that this number is lower than the original number. Many small beach cobbles or small boulders that were covered with this motif were removed from the island and now reside in museums around the world. The sizes of *komari* vary enormously as do the techniques. Some are incised on dense basalt boulders while others are pecked and abraded into *papa* (flat lava flow). In many instances at 'Orongo, *komari* are superimposed onto images of birdman.

Motifs of turtles (*honu*) on Easter Island are of interest in that turtles have always been a rarity here, and only one has come ashore in recent years. Islanders say turtles disappeared along with the passing of the ancient kings of the island (Métraux 1971:187), but that they did come to the island is

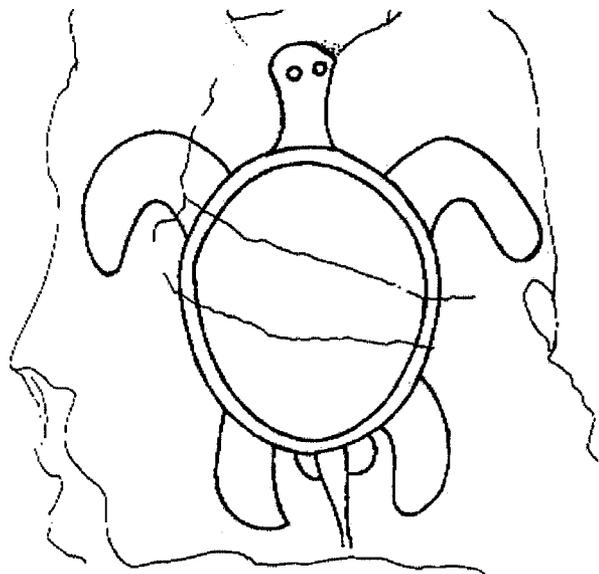


Figure 2. A fine turtle at Omohe, near the more complex panel seen in Figure 3.

clear from the numerous images of them in the rock art. Métraux (ibid.) also notes that turtle shell ornaments were found in island caves and graves. In Polynesia, turtles were sacred, connected to royalty, and were accorded special ritual practices. They contained sufficient mana to be used as a substitute for a human sacrifice. In the Marquesas, turtle petroglyphs were said to be offerings or prayers for rain, or a record of turtle sacrifice (Suggs 1961:150).

The rock art documentation project on Easter Island (Lee 1992) recorded 32 turtle motifs; but, since that time, excavations at Tongariki uncovered two more, bringing the island total up to 34.

Tuna (*kahn*) is, and apparently was, a great delicacy on the island. Many petroglyphs show this type of fish, some with details including fins, or x-ray versions with vertebrae indicated. Although only 17 can be unequivocally called "tuna", others are likely to have been intended as such, but details are inconclusive. Fish images may be a metaphor for human sacrifice for human victims were considered as "fish for the gods" throughout Polynesia.

One hundred fifty-eight fish motifs (all types) were documented on the island. This hardly expresses their importance as a motif, for size certainly plays a part here. Some are enormous, particularly those at the fine petroglyph site at Tongariki. This number is a major difference between the rock art of Hawai'i and Easter Island, for it is rare to find a fish motif in Hawaiian rock art (Lee and Stasack 1999).

Finally, we should mention the *makemake* faces that literally cover the turtle and tuna motifs at Omohe. These particular faces are called "eye-mask" faces, for they focus on the eyes only with lines that form double or triple outlines. On the island as a whole, 191 eye-mask faces were recorded. When combined with the "regular" *makemake* faces and the eyes-nose faces, we have a total of 517, making the face motif one of the most prominent on the island...and not far shy of the island's most numerous motif, *komari*. These sums are in great contrast to the small number of complete human figures in the rock art (24).

Although Routledge (1920:450) suggested some of the faces were portraits of certain individuals, Ferdon (1961:252) described them as being of the god Makemake. Locals on the island suggested the faces were an emblem of the Miru tribe (the status group in ancient times).

The second legend is told about two petroglyph sites on the hills north of 'Anakena (Figure 1). One of the sites has two sea creatures with human faces plus a smaller figure (perhaps symbolizing an offspring) (Figure 4). The two figures, in double



Figure 3. A complex panel at Omohe featuring a turtle, tuna, makemake faces, boathouse foundation motifs, and komari. The panel is eroded, and the head of the turtle has chipped away. This drawing shows the head as seen in 1935 by Lavachery. The panel measures 400 x 230 cm.

and triple outline, are deeply pecked and grooved and obviously made with much care and effort. Today the motifs are mostly covered with lichen, and locals call these figures "Dos Caras". Not far off is another large fish/human figure (Figure 5), not as well executed. According to Keremo Ika it represented Ure, the husband of Kuha and Rati.

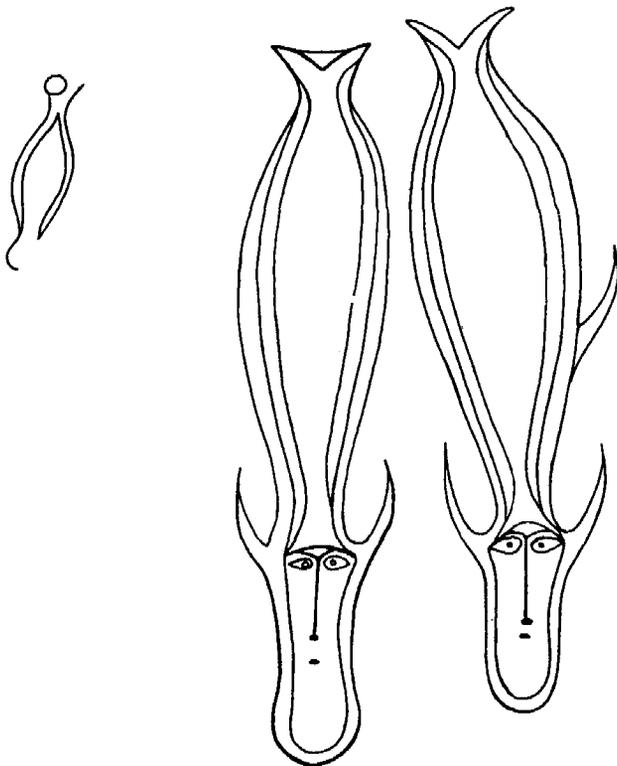


Figure 4. Locally called "Dos Caras" these figures were identified as Kuha and Rati. Presumably the small figure above left represents an offspring. This panel is 330 x 270 cm.

**THE LEGEND OF KUHA AND RATI**

Two beautiful girls were born in Nga Tavake, in Hiva 'O Vaka Vaka. One had blonde hair and one had chestnut hair and they were born on the same day at the same hour. Their father called them Kuha and Rati. Their parents cared for them until they were grown and taught them the secrets of life and how to transform themselves with supernatural mana. When they were aged thirty, Kuha said to Rati: "I have an idea; why don't we fly away and see if we can find another place, another Hiva, in order to look for a man for you and a man for me, because here in Hiva 'O Vake Vake there are more women than men." She added, "Let us change ourselves into fish and we can travel deep in the sea." They came to Tahiti at a place called Puna Vai, where they stayed for some years, but found no men. One day Kuha said, "Let us go from here and look for another Hiva". Rati said, "Whatever, you say", and so they trans-

formed into spirits and flew like birds and swam like fish, and came to Te Pito 'O te Henua. They swam into a bay at Hanga Papara, near Hanga Ho'onu. Kuha came out of the sea and changed from a spirit into a human form and looked around. She called, "Look Rati, come out of the water. We have arrived to the land of the King Hotu Matu'a who came from Hiva." Rati came ashore and changed into human form, and said, "Listen, I hear the voices of *tavake* birds." Kuha replied, "It seems so, our spirits flew like birds to see what there is here, and came to Papa Mahina."<sup>2</sup>

But before they got to Papa Mahina, they saw a young man seated next to a *hare paenga*. He had seen two birds flying in the clouds, and then they transformed into beautiful women. They greeted the man, whose name was Ure, and sat next to him on a platform. The two spirits asked him why he was sitting there and he replied, "I am here because I am a young man and I am thinking." The two spirits said, "We want you for our husband." The man said, "Aiee, no! how can I have two wives? And besides, you may be *aku aku* spirits. Where are you from?"

Kuha replied, "I am Kuha and she is Rati; we are sisters from Hiva 'O Vake Vake." Ure asked why they had come, for he was happy living with his old father, Vai Ahuhe. Kuha and Rati replied, "We want you for our husband."

Then Kahu and Rati lived there several days with Vai Anuhe but all they thought about was possessing Ure. One afternoon Kuha said to Rati, "Why are the hands of Ure painted red and look like a *rakutia* (*aku aku*)?" Ure replied, "You do not understand that it is the custom here; the red paint is to make one more beautiful."

More time passed and the two spirits said to Ure, "We still want you for our husband." Ure replied, "Think about it well, how can we all live in one small house? Let us go to Nga Iho Po'u in Hanga Rau at the bay of 'Anakena. There we will look for a good place to build a house and raise food to feed the warriors that will be born."

Some years passed and many children were born. All learned to read the *rongorongo*. But Kuhu and Rati were growing older and one day they said to Ure, "Come here, we

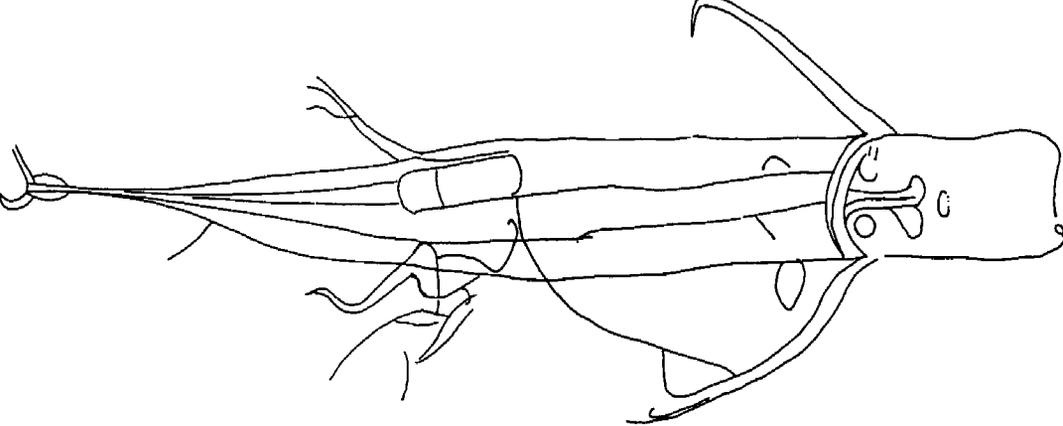


Figure 5. Ure, the handsome husband of Kuha and Rati is less well carved and has other figures superimposed on the body. Note unusual treatment of his 'tail'. This figure measures seven meters long.

must talk." Ure came close and said, "My dear wives, tell me what you wish?" "Husband, we are going to return to Hiva. We have lived here many happy years and now we wish to return to where our parents were born. There we will die together. Tell our children what we told you, and carve a portrait of us as a memory of our lives together." Ure answered, "I will do all you ask. Good luck to the spirits of Hiva." Then the two spirits recited a verse:

I am Kuha and she is Rati  
We came in the form of birds and fish  
Our spirits came from Hiva  
Looking for a beautiful man  
Now we will return to Hiva 'O Vake Vake.

Then they transformed into birds and flew away.

The two figures (Figure 4) that are said to represent Kuha and Rati have clearly defined eyes with pupils, and a line indicating a nose with a small circle at the end. Fin-like ears are on each side of the head and the bodies end in small fish tails. A smaller similarly shaped figure is off to one side and may represent an offspring.

The other sea creature with a human face (Figure 5), said to represent Ure, is seven meters long and is faintly carved. A squarish face has long "fin" ears, eyes, nose, and mouth. The long body is divided by two lines running its length, and a "mini moai" figure is placed on the body. The body ends in a curved tail; a small rounded shape at the tail is similar to those seen on other sea creature petroglyphs on the island, particularly at the Rano Kau site. Other, mostly indistinct, lines are on the lower part of the body. Which came first was impossible to determine.

The mini-moai motif is ubiquitous on the island, and these small anthropomorphic figures that may represent moai statues often are found in pairs or groups. Chin lines are nearly always indicated on these figures and facial features are frequently shown also. Many are in bas relief. Our field surveys recorded 117 mini-moai on the island, and that likely is a low count as they are very faint and easily overlooked. What they signified in the ancient society is unknown.

As for the human-fish beings, these examples are not unique in the island's rock art, but they are special in that a legend is associated with them. Other sea creature petroglyphs with human attributes are found at Rano Kau, Ava 'O Kiri, Pua te Vaka, and at other locations near 'Anakena. The penchant on Rapa Nui for combining human and animal forms is, of course, most notable in the famous birdman motif of the island that combines a human body with the head of a frigate bird. Combined creatures are frequent in the woodcarvings of the island, where we see human figures with bird heads and tails, or lizard-like forms with bird tails and human parts. Such visual punning is typical in Polynesian art (Kurze 1997).

## CONCLUSION

It is rare to find a legend about petroglyph sites on Easter Island. Many more must have been known at one time, but are now forgotten. How can we know these legends are ancient? Legends collected late in time may be suspect for they can be

corrupted over the years and in the telling and re-telling from generation to generation. It is possible they were created to explain an ancient rock carving that was made in past times for some other reason. However both of the above legends were told by elderly natives of the island, some of whom are considered as 'culture bearers' due to their knowledge of ancient ways.

In the final analysis, we don't know whether the legend or the petroglyphs came first. The stories mention specific places on the island and are expressly associated with actual rock carvings, and the legends are among the few that do not deal with warfare and destruction. What does come through clearly is the absolute isolation of this small island and a longing for other lands, a desire to leave and return, choices denied the mere mortals who lived on this strife-torn island in ancient times. Because both stories deal with isolation, it is likely they possess some claim to antiquity. ❖

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> With thanks to Keremo Ika Araki for his assistance on this project.  
<sup>2</sup> The reference to Papa Mahina (moon-rock) is obscure. This site is inland from Ahu Ra'ai and Hanga Ho'onu at La Pérouse Bay. The rock that is identified by locals as Papa Mahina appears fairly undistinguished. It is flat lava flow, round in shape. Petroglyphs are associated with it, but Papa Mahina itself lacks any identifying markings.

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