WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH (IN ANTHROPOLOGY/ARCHAEOLOGY) ON EASTER ISLAND IN THE FUTURE?

I have so many possible research projects on Easter Island that would make your head spin. If there were five MA students who wanted to work on Easter Island, I could give them each a viable project in the next 6 minutes. Give me five more, and it will take about 10 minutes and a lecture to get them started.

I have four concise ideas about what I would like to do in the future, all small but critical projects to answer one, two, or three straightforward questions about Easter Island’s prehistory, but I have also seen that, among several Easter Island researchers, that my ideas have become our projects and so, reluctantly, I won’t mention them at this point. Sadly, I’ve learned to distrust publicizing one’s future plans. Geology, also, is becoming somewhat similar but it has taken two decades to catch up.

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING?

I have just finished “In the Heart of the Sea”, by Philbrick, am nearly finished with “Krakatoa” by Winchester, and am starting “White Rivers & Black”, by MacCreagh.

REVIEWS

The Long Summer: How Climate Changed Civilisation

Brian Fagan
252 pp., plus notes and index. Hard cover

Review by Georgia Lee, Ph.D.

The title of Fagan’s book, “The Long Summer…” refers to global warming that began some 18,000 years ago with the end of the last Ice Age, and which has since continued. According to the author, Earth’s climate has shaped civilizations. Fagan states: “Climate is, and always has been, a powerful catalyst in human history…”

Well-researched and written, this book is classic environmental determinism: history as shaped by climate – and a study of climate change aimed for those who are concerned with the future of civilization. Never mind Genghis Kahn, climate is the major player in the fall of civilizations.

Climatic studies provide some really dreadful warnings and this book puts them out there for us to ponder. Over millennia, civilizations arose, people ravaged their local habitats, and then found themselves vulnerable to climate shifts; when the climate changed, the civilization ended. Ancient Egypt was once in a benign Sahara – but it was turned into a desert. And, once a society is on the edge of environmental vulnerability, it takes very little to push it over: a change in weather patterns, a drought, or a 500-year cold snap (such as happened in Europe in the 14th century).

This book presents a haunting chronicle of our planet’s past, and the impact on our frail species. While Fagan does not address Easter Island, he does explore the effects of El Niño on the Pacific Ocean and its associated landmasses. The bottom line is that, despite a long history of overpopulation and deforestation, we still have not learned to live reasonably. We have not learned from the past but have only increased the scale of our vulnerability. Sea levels rise, icecaps shrink, and the world’s population is placed in a global experiment of unguessable consequences. Fagan writes, “Civilisation arose during a remarkably long summer… We still have no idea when, or how, that summer will end.”

Between Nature and Culture;
The Burial of the Placenta in French Polynesia
(Entre nature et culture - La mise en terre du placenta en Polynésie française)

Bruno Saura
Haere Po, 2003. P.O. Box 1958 - 98 713 Papeete, Tahiti
Softcover, 162 pages ISBN 2 904-171 54-6

Translation and Review by Ann M. Altman, Ph.D.

This book, by a professor at the University of French Polynesia in Tahiti, is both fascinating and frustrating: fascinating because of the subject matter and frustrating because of the presentation. The book deals in exhaustive detail with the custom, widespread throughout the Pacific, of ceremonial disposal of the placenta and umbilical cord after the birth of a child, which often, in Tahiti, occurs in conjunction with the planting of a tree. However, while the details of such practices, comparisons among Pacific islands, and analogies are of great interest, the book is written, somewhat disconcertingly, in three languages, namely, French, English and Tahitian, with frequent inclusion of Tahitian words in parentheses when the text is in English or French. Moreover, while there are numerous subheadings in each chapter, the book lacks an index so that the copious information in each section is relatively inaccessible.

To add to the confusion, there is a brief summary of topics covered at the front of the book and a more comprehensive Table of Contents at the back. It is only from the Table of Contents that it becomes clear that some of the contributions to the book are not by Saura and that many of them have been published elsewhere. Moreover, some of the material appears in both French and English; some appear only in French; and some appear in both French and Tahitian.

It is certainly kind of Saura to provide translations of some of the material but it is unclear why only some of the text is translated and some is not. For example, one wonders why the lengthy discussion with Robert Koenig (the Director of the Haerepo Press), printed in French at the end of the book, is translated into Tahitian but not into English, while one chapter by Saura is translated into English and others are not. A contribution in English by Georgia Lee is translated into French but the work of Pascale Bonnemère is only accessible to those who read French.

But now, having given full vent to my frustrations, I shall focus exclusively on what is admirable and interest-
ing. One striking feature of the book, which is accessible to everyone, is its illustrated cover, which shows a painting by Bobby [sic], called “Te hotu e te fenua” (the fruit of the earth). The picture shows a pregnant woman, carrying within her a child who is linked to the earth by its umbilical cord. Attached to the cord is the placenta, which is destined to be buried after the child's birth and is already nourishing the earth, while a fruit-bearing tree is growing from the mother's navel. This painting provides an immediate distillation of the contents of the book.

The book itself begins with these two questions, raised by Saura’s students at the University of French Polynesia, “If someone’s placenta is not buried in Tahiti, is he or she condemned to be forever a stranger here? If the placenta of a non-Polynesian is buried here, does that mean that he or she becomes a native Tahitian?” These questions led Saura to study the practice of burying the placenta and to examine the roots and cultural implications of this practice. His research revealed the great variety, in Eastern Polynesia, of practices related to the disposal of the placenta and to the nub of the umbilical cord that initially remains attached to and then detaches from the newborn’s navel.

The first section of the book deals with the importance of the burial of the placenta in traditional Polynesian culture. This chapter was originally published in English as “Continuity of Bodies: the Infant’s Placenta and the Island’s Navel in Eastern Polynesia”. The paper in English was originally written in French and both the original French article and the English translation are included. The two versions of this work are followed by comments by Georgia Lee, also published previously, and reproduced here in English with a French translation. Lee discusses the similarities between practices in Eastern Polynesia and those in Hawai'i and Rapa Nui. As described in detail by Saura and summarized by Lee, “wide dissemination indicates connections far back across Polynesia.”

The second section of the book is entitled, “The Churches’ Navels and the Human Placenta in Eastern Polynesia.” Saura first discusses the laying of foundation stones or incorporation of a type of time capsule during the construction of Christian and, more specifically, Protestant churches in French Polynesia. Such time capsules might contain a Bible in Tahitian and some trinkets. He then continues with a discussion of ancient religious structures and the practice of placing the placenta and the nub of a baby’s umbilical cord in an ancestral vault or on an altar.

With the disappearance of ancestral tombs and ceremonial altars, the placenta was buried inside the baby’s home, or in the courtyard of the baby’s home, near a tree, or, in some cases, with a tree planted over the burial site. At the end of this section, Saura writes: “These examples from Polynesia also show us how interactions emerge between rites, related to foundations, that are derived from similar constructs. The social importance of a rite that consists of putting relics in a container that is normally placed at the entrance to a place of worship can be explained as an echo, for each person, of the burial of a placenta at the entrance to a house.”

The third section of the book, entitled “Evolution of Practices and Their Significance”, deals with present-day Tahiti. Saura notes that one woman in two still takes the placenta home after the birth of her child in a hospital setting. In more rural settings, the number of women keeping the placenta rises to nine in ten. For the choice of a burial site, the new mother turns to the baby’s father or grandfather. Once the placenta has been buried, at some depth to protect it from marauding dogs, a tree – and it should be a fruit tree and not, simply, an ornamental tree – is planted on the site or a stone slab is placed over the hole, with a bush planted nearby. This section of the book concludes with a piece by Pascale Bonnemère, entitled, “The disposal of the placenta in Oceania – a single practice with many meanings,” in which Bonnemère comments on Saura’s work in relation to practices in Papua-New Guinea.

The final section of the book, is entitled “Dialogue” in French and “Ha’aporora’a; Te Tanura’a i te pufenua, e peu tumu ora i te ao ma’ohi nei” in Tahitian, which leads me to suspect that something has been ‘lost in translation’. No English translation is provided but the crux of the rather free-ranging discussion is the intersection between nature (the expulsion of the placenta) and culture (the burial of the placenta near a tree).

This book, which includes both new and previously published work by Saura and others, provides a wealth of interesting information and speculation, which should be of interest to anyone with a deep interest in Polynesian culture. It is a pity, however, that those who speak only English or Tahitian will be able to appreciate only some of the chapters in the book.