

Reports and Commentaries

Rapa Nui in Tenerife

Paul Bahn

On the morning of 16 January 2012, a major permanent exhibition about Rapa Nui was officially opened at Güímar on Tenerife, in Spain's Canary Islands. Some RNJ readers will already be aware that this exhibition has been painstakingly created over the past few years by Sonia Haoa, and is financed by Fred Olsen. It now forms part of Fred's Ethnographic Park, which comprises a museum primarily devoted to the life and theories of Thor Heyerdahl, and also the "pyramids" of Güímar, which featured so strongly in those theories. The park also features some wonderful botanical specimens from these very special islands, as well as interesting old photographs and texts describing aspects of the history of the Canaries. There is also a store and a cafeteria.

Sonia's exhibition, entitled "Rapa Nui. Supervivencia Extrema" (Extreme Survival) is housed in a large tent-like structure, about 500m square. It lies beside an even bigger tent-building, which is to house a major permanent exhibit on the subject of navigation, especially by Polynesians. It is hoped that the navigation exhibition will open within a few months.

The official opening was attended not only by Fred Olsen himself, but also by the mayor of Güímar, the governor of Tenerife, and the Chilean consul in Tenerife. In addition, a number of islanders were able to be present, most notably Yuriko Westermeier Tuki, representing the mayor of Rapa Nui; Julio Araki Tepano, a municipal councillor; Mahina Lucero Teao, director of the Cámara de Turismo on Rapa Nui; and Ninoska Cuadros Húcke, director of CONAF on Rapa Nui. Ludo Tuki, another representative of the Cámara de Turismo, sang and performed a brief dance in front of the *moai*.

One wall of the navigation building is covered by a giant photo of the outer slope of Rano Raraku, with the tourists in the photo turned into ancient Rapa Nui figures by a painter. The positioning of the photo is no accident, because directly above its top edge the vista continues with the spectacular scenery of volcanic mountains in the distance as if to form a single image.

In front of this photo stands a life-size accurate copy of one of the *moai* at Ahu Akivi, and to one side is a small model of the main petroglyph panel at Papa Vaka.

Inside the Rapa Nui tent itself, the four walls are covered with (mostly excellent) photos, drawings, maps and texts – all in both Spanish and English. One begins with the Pacific context, Polynesian religion, and the island's geology. One then moves on to the story of Hotu Matu'a, social organization, society and settlement. The next sections cover the carving of the *moai* and the main theories about their transportation. One then moves on to "Drastic changes in scenario", which manages to combine both Flenley's and the Orliacs' views of what happened to the island's ecology. This is followed by "Conflict", and "Messengers of the Gods" (i.e., the birdman ritual). Finally, a section of particular importance to Sonia, and largely based on her own work and research interests, is called "Papa, puku and maea: new life in the stone", and explains how the ever-ingenious islanders adapted to the new conditions and came up with the idea of extensive lithic mulching, together with *manavai* and various other kinds of gardens. Finally, one reaches "Two worlds: fatal encounters" (the impact of Europeans), then a panel of portrait photos of some present-day islanders, and – perhaps most important of all – a last panel entitled "Survival of the legacy" which briefly examines some of the many dangers of different kinds that today threaten the island, its people, and of course its archaeological heritage.

The texts are excellent, presenting a great deal of important information to the public, but in a way that is easy to understand, and also mercifully free of some of the more fanciful ideas that have been dogging us in the past few years.

In the center of the tent are display cases containing the main kinds of wooden carvings from the island, as well as a range of stone tools. There are also large columns comprising large color photos, with other color photos of the sky hanging horizontally above them. Finally, there are two TV screens, back to back, one of which shows a dazzling array of photos of the island by Micheline Pelletier, and the other showing a film, lasting about 20 minutes, which is a superb montage of all kinds of subjects, including some of the black

and white footage from the Franco-Belgian expedition of the 1930s, as well as virtually every subject one can think of, flocks of sheep, herds of horses, Tapati events, carving and transporting statues, cat's cradles, tree-felling, statue-toppling, and so forth – there is even a brief interview with Sonia's late father. One particularly striking effect is the end wall which, once again, is a massive photo of the outer slope of Rano Raraku, but with a couple of big *moai* photos placed just in front, separate from the background, giving a 3D effect.

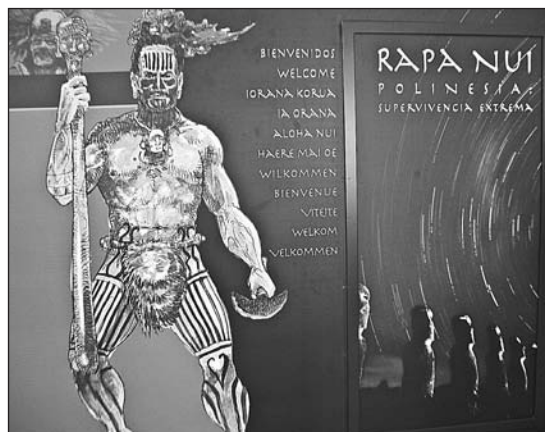
I found very few things to criticize – one or two photos could be improved, the famous drawing from the La Pérouse expedition is the wrong way around, and there are electrical sockets in the middle of some images, which should really have been placed at ground level. But overall, the display is a triumph, and both Sonia and Fred are to be thanked and congratulated for having the vision and the capability to create this. As far as I am aware, it is the only permanent exhibit about Rapa Nui of its kind in the world, and for that reason alone it is a definite must for any readers who visit the Canary Islands.



Sonia Haoa, Carmen Luisa Castro (the mayor of Güímar), and Fred Olsen at the inauguration of the exhibition.



Photo showing the 3D-effect display of the outer slope of Rano Raraku.



Figures clockwise from above left:

Ludo Tuki performing his song and dance in front of the *moai*.

The entrance display at the expo.

The column made up of large photos, with horizontal photos of the sky above.

The giant photo of Rano Raraku with Tenerife scenery continuing above.

