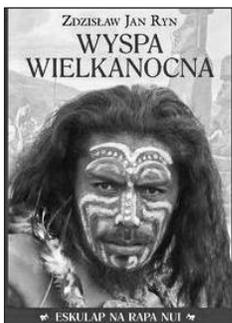


## Book Reviews

Ryn, Zdzisław Jan. *Wyspa Wielkanocna. Eskulap na Rapa Nui* [Easter Island. A Doctor on Rapa Nui].



Cracow: Medycyna Praktyczna, 2013. 509 pp., Black and white photographs. ISBN 978-8374303651. PLN\$34.30 (hardcover).

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On the Polish reading market, there are very few books concerning Easter Island, especially when we are talking about serious, scientific works. Most publications are sensationalist or popular texts, often translated from the English language, that repeat common clichés and beliefs, situating the island in the realm of enigma and mystery. It is very hard to eradicate old legends or speculations that are treated as truths about the Rapa Nui past and place them where they belong: that is, in the world of folklore and traditions.

One of the books that recently has tried to fill this gap is a voluminous publication by Zdzisław Jan Ryn. The author, a professor of psychiatry, is a former Polish ambassador in Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, a traveler, and was also the scientific director of the Polish team of speleologists who were conducting research in the caves of Easter Island in the 2000s.

The book by Ryn is divided into 19 chapters of various lengths. There is no index and no separate section devoted to a bibliography. Although the work is supposed to investigate traditional medicine on Rapa Nui in contrast to conventional Western medicine, the author announces in the introduction that he is going to touch upon more aspects of the island's history and culture. As a result, the book is practically dedicated to the entire history of Rapa Nui, from the remote past to the contemporary social and political problems, exploring topics such as ancient lifestyle and material culture, and with less than a half of the publication devoted to medicine and health issues (the "Glossary of Medical Terms" also includes many entries of a general nature).

Nevertheless, the real value of the book resides precisely in the sections about traditional medical practices, the figure of a folk healer and his connection with the spiritual world, herbalism, and its difficult coexistence with modern medicine brought from the continent – as well as in the commentaries on the present sociopolitical situation of the islanders. To describe some of the questions treated in this work, there are chapters devoted to the pioneering Canadian Medical Expedition METEI (in the 1960s), whose director was Stanley Skoryna, a doctor of Polish origin, and to a disease that became a real stigma of the Rapanui people: leprosy. The publication also contains a short chapter dedicated to rapamycin, an immunosuppressant antibiotic, which is a product of bacteria *Streptomyces hygroscopicus*, isolated from Easter Island soil (Ryn writes erroneously that it is a fungus). In the course of the book, the author promotes the Polish speleological research.

In spite of the topics treated, the approach and the methodology place the publication by Ryn in the field of popular science. The author presents the island's reality as well as the world of dreams, myths and legends; on his book's pages both spheres are interwoven in such a way that it is difficult for a layperson to tell the facts from the fantasy, which may potentially strengthen the popular tendency to believe in imaginary stereotypes. Moreover, Ryn quotes widespread hypotheses concerning the island's history which are based on events that have already been discarded by some renowned scientists. He also does not refer to the latest theories and research results that cast new light on certain unknown aspects from the Rapa Nui past. For example, among his sources such names as Hunt, Lipo, Love, Shepardson, Wozniak, and Cauwe appear only incidentally or not at all. Ryn is rather adherent of the theories of 'collapse' and 'ecocide' (opposite arguments for which opinions are rather scarce), with the vision of Rapa Nui as a metaphor of a fragile Earth that can be easily destroyed by incautious human actions, although in recent years, many voices have arisen to defend the indigenous Easter Islanders and their ancient way of life.

Also, when Ryn wants to make reference to the narratives of the early explorers and missionaries who visited Rapa Nui – and such cases are very frequent – he almost always quotes from the second-, or even third-hand sources, although classical editions of those documents or their translations exist (e.g., Mellén Blanco for Spanish texts, Beaglehole for Cook's journals, or even quite recent re-editions of chosen journal excerpts from the first three expeditions, issued by Rapanui Press). On the other hand, he does

cite the famous travelers and/or ethnologists, such as Thomson, Routledge, Métraux and Englert. In many cases, Ryn completely omits references to the sources of his knowledge.

What constitutes another weak point of the book is that the author treats as many topics as possible, viewed from various angles, and often is not aware of the fact that – given the volume of the book – he sometimes mixes up threads and motives that are contradictory or at variance with the established chronology. This concerns even known historical facts; e.g., he says that Dutrou-Bornier was murdered during the rebellion of Angata (p. 44), and that the Spanish commanded by González arrived at the island 40 years later than Pierre Loti (p. 66-67). Ryn also does not lead the reader through all the analyzed topics to show where to seek out the most reliable interpretations, but presents us with every possible explanation, almost indifferently. In the attempt to provide original names of described phenomena, the author uses Spanish and Rapanui words alternatively, without any commentary. What's more, numerous terms and proper nouns are written with spelling mistakes or are not accompanied by existing Polish equivalents; sometimes the analyzed cultural phenomena, their explanation, and their names are misunderstood or mismatched. The book also contains numerous repetitions of the same concepts and lines of discourse.

At times, Ryn vacillates between presenting the popular, attractive, but somewhat anachronistic vision of Rapa Nui, whose culture in many aspects remains 'mysterious' and undiscovered, and a more realistic approach where many unclear issues have already found their undisputed explanation, and thus – as he says – it is better to use the term 'the unknown' or 'the uninvestigated' instead of 'mystery' (p. 389). For example, at the beginning of the book Ryn alleges that the origin of the Rapanui people is still uncertain, only to assert later that they are undoubtedly of Polynesian descent. Another controversial issue in which the author seems to be in favor of, as well as against, the hypothesis of cannibalism. He also frequently mentions intertribal wars, as a result of which the *moai* were deliberately destroyed; it is a very widespread hypothesis, supported by myths and legends (not very ancient, to tell the truth), but there appear to be alternative, convincing theories that are also worthy of attention.

What constitutes the real merit of Ryn is his effort to bring the reader's attention to the fact that it was

the contact with Western civilization that proved to be tragic for the Rapanui people, especially in the 19th century (slave raids, epidemics, foreign oppression). He emphasizes disastrous changes it caused – and is still causing – to their lifestyle, social structure, and physical condition. He worries about the future of the island, its people and archaeological heritage, and tries to offer some programs designed to help the indigenous society cope with the pressure from the 'outer world'. The author stresses contradictory interests of the Rapanui, who want to regain their ancestral lands, and the Chilean State, proud to possess such a valuable (and profitable) 'open air museum'.

However, I was certainly doubtful when I read that "[t]he Rapanui people's future resides in the culture tourism understood as cultivation of old traditions, art, dances, songs and language, without their deformation in order to meet the taste of tourists" (p. 390). Or: "Easter Island will remain an international tourist and cultural attraction as long as it will be – as Rapa Nui – inhabited by indigenous people of biological and cultural Polynesian descent" (p. 390-391). Or: "Rapa Nui, deprived of its archaeological objects – *ahu* and *moai* – will no longer be attractive as well for tourists as for the natives" (p. 392) [translation Z.J.]. There is some reason in what Ryn says, but, first of all, the Rapanui traditions already *are* partially re-invented, with models being ingeniously sought in other Polynesian cultures out of necessity; we must not forget that during the 19th century, Rapanui society was on the verge of extermination. And secondly, such a vision implicates a rather materialistic view of the island, tending to turn it into a living museum without giving people a right to choose their future and individual walks of life. Sometimes I wonder what the islanders feel when so many professionals and amateurs, anthropologists and archaeologists – no matter how good-willed – tell them how they should live.

To sum up, the book by Ryn, multi-layered and abundant in themes and opinions, is not a piece of easy reading for everyone. Neither is it an academic monograph. However, it offers some interesting insights into the Rapanui past, present and future, into its culture and history, with a special emphasis on traditional medicine, as well as on the mental and physical health of the local community. Nevertheless, the author, obviously fascinated by Easter Island and caring for the good of its people, at times was somewhat careless when writing his book; that is why the reader has to take care when studying it.