

Getting to Know You

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Q. How did you get into history, and specifically, the history and anthropology of Rapa Nui? What triggered your interest?

A. Since I was young, I was an avid reader of history books. All kinds of history: from Ethnic history to Military, Cultural and Political. My mother is Rapanui, so despite living most of my childhood in Santiago, I had lots of exposure to all things Rapanui: books, music, crafts, and family!

When I was in high school I realized that among the thousands of books about Rapa Nui, I could not see any written by professional historians. In fact, there weren't any history books about the island... All of them focused on the past, but the very remote one, so they were written by archaeologists. Even the few history books about the island that have appeared since then have been written by non-historians. So my first motivation when I decided to study history in the university was to write about the not-so-distant past of the island, which I found incredibly interesting, and I hoped to awaken the interest of Chilean and foreign historians about Rapa Nui.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. Many years ago, my German grandfather, Esteban Schanz, sent me tons of books about the island. Reading them was probably what fuelled my desire for knowledge and teaching. I think I am pretty eclectic when it comes to influences from social science and philosophy: Friedrich Nietzsche's thought has been with me since before I started researching. Huge influences come from free-thinkers like Bertrand Russell, Tzvetan Todorov, Peter Sloterdijk and Umberto Eco. Alfred Métraux's *Ethnology of Easter Island* had a deep impact on me when I first read it. The same goes for Thomas Barthel's *The Eighth Land* which I believe to be a fantastic work, very underrated. Current scholars like Grant McCall and Steven Roger Fischer have published wonderful material. However, the writing that probably influenced me the most for my work is the book by the Council of the Elders of Rapa Nui titled *Te Mau Hatu O Rapanui*, which was published in 1988.

Nothing inspires me more, though, than the island's landscapes and its isolation.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out differently from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

- A. Chilean anthropologist and Professor Rolf Foerster asked me once through e-mail about the difference between old Rapanui kings like Nga'ara or Kaimako'i and later kings like Atamu Tekena and Riro Kainga. I took some time to answer, checking documents and asking other Rapanui for their opinion. I ended up obsessing with the subject and answered several days later with a very long message, filled with references. Foerster told me to choose a title and publish it so he could quote some parts and add it to the reference section. It ended up being my first published article titled "El poder político nativo en Rapa Nui tras la muerte de los últimos 'Ariki Mau". It appeared in a book about the "Compañía Explotadora de Isla de Pascua" edited by Claudio Cristino and Miguel Fuentes in 2011.
- Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?
- A. I can easily imagine myself as a musician and record producer. When I was in my early teens, I started playing drums and, sometime later, I learned how to play some guitar. About five years ago, I started composing using software synthesizers on my computer but never had the time to give more dedication to it. Being a full-time musician would have been difficult though. Taking that into consideration, I think the easiest way would have been to become a composer of soundtracks for movies and/or TV series.
- Q. What was your best Eureka moment?
- A. When I realized that it's not necessary to wait for someone else to do the research and to write about a certain subject you're interested in.
- Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in history) on Rapa Nui in the future?
- A. I hope to increase awareness within the local community and abroad about an exciting period of the island's past: the last 200 years. I would like to contribute to a better knowledge of the links that connect the most "outstanding" events, and all things overshadowed by them.
- Q. What is your favorite site on Rapa Nui and why?
- A. Poike Península, especially the crater Pū a Katiki. I think I can feel the earth moving up there and I always get that necessary dose of silence and tranquility with my favorite landscape view of the island.
- Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?
- A. The myth of the passive and vulnerable Rapanui community, crushed and assimilated by the two colonial powers (the Company and the State) in the first half of the 20th century. Both colonial powers were domesticated and, to a great extent, had to yield to the Rapanui's subtle moves.
- Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Rapa Nui?
- A. That second and third impressions are always much more interesting and rewarding than the first ones.
- Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Rapa Nui history or anthropology (or those fields generally)?
- A. Never get too attached to pre-conceived ideas you might have about the island. I always tried to find patterns to guide my understanding about the island's history: they might be useful for a while, but they get old very quickly as your knowledge increases. You learn new things about Rapa Nui that might shatter some of your previous thoughts almost daily.
- Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of history and anthropology?
- A. Two things: The inability of scholars to recognize any faults on their own approaches, and the increasingly "academic" and "technical" tone of most papers/articles, making them undecipherable for common people. The only way for studies and research to matter is by being able to transmit the knowledge to lots of people, not just for an "elite" of intellectuals.
- Q. What are you currently reading?
- A. I'm currently reading Edmundo Edwards' book "When the Universe was an Island" and, unrelated to Rapa Nui, German historian Ernst Nolte's book "The European Civil War: National Socialism vs. Bolshevism 1917-1945".
- Q. Credentials?
- A. Historian of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Founder of Ahireña Center of Historic Studies.
- Q. Date and place of birth?
- A. September 20th, 1982, Santiago de Chile.