Ascension: proposal for a reconstruction of Ure Vaeiko’s Apai recitation

M. de Laat

The recitations of the Easter Island native Ure Vaeiko that were recorded in 1886 belong to the very small corpus of traditional Rapanui literature that has been preserved. Although the value of individual texts is disputed, the chants that were published as Atua Matariri, Eaha to Ran Ariiki Kete and Apai are generally considered to be genuine examples of so-called “Old Rapanui”. Of these three, the Apai text is by far the most enigmatic, as it has been recorded and published in a way that renders it virtually incomprehensible. The accompanying attempt at translation is a confused narrative that appears to have only a fragmentary relation to the chant. This paper presents a tentative reconstruction of the original Apai text, together with a new translation. It is proposed that Apai contains an origin myth which intends to explain certain celestial phenomena regarding the sun and the planet Venus, set against the familiar Polynesian background of the eternal struggle between the brother gods Tangaroa and Tane. As such, it could provide valuable information on pre-missionary Easter Island astronomy, mythology, and literature.

Introduction

The Apai text is thought to be one of the few remaining examples of traditional Rapanui literature. It was collected during the 1886 American expedition of the USS Mohican by Paymaster Thomson and his intermediary and translator, the Tahitian-born immigrant Salmon, in an attempt to find a key to the decipherment of the rongorongo script. Their source was an old man named Ure Vaeiko, who was said to have been in the service of the literate king Nga’ara. In a single session that lasted from the evening of December 29 until the next morning, an initially reluctant Ure Vaeiko recited five texts to photographs taken from inscribed tablets in the collection of Bishop Jaussen of Tahiti.

The results of the session – the Rapanui texts and their translations – were published in Thomson’s Smithsonian report of 1891, together with pictures and drawings of tablets. Although each recitation is ascribed to a specific artifact, it is doubtful whether these associations are correct. The point is of minor importance, however, since it is generally accepted that Ure Vaeiko was not reading the inscriptions but reciting from memory (Fischer 1997:92). Thomson (1891:516) himself already came to this conclusion when he observed that changing the photographs did not cause an interruption of the recitation.

Unfortunately, the original notes have disappeared, the printed text is full of errors, the meaning of much of the Rapanui texts is obscure, and the English translations waver between very free and totally unreliable. This sad state of affairs has been attributed to the unfavorable circumstances surrounding both the recording and the publishing process. Doubts have been raised on the reliability of the memory of the informant,
given the fact that he was already 83 years old at the time and that he was offered alcohol to overcome his unwillingness to share his knowledge of the unchristian rongorongo writing. The late and long hours of the meeting and the obvious haste with which Salmon – stretched out on the floor of a simple cabin – had to take his notes and produce the English translation were another complicating factor. Although Salmon spoke Rapanui and had acquainted himself with the remains of traditional Easter Island culture, he had to record Ure Vaiego’s chanting going by ear, without the help of a dictionary or established spelling rules, and he had to interpret it from what the old man was able to explain.

These difficulties were greatly aggravated by the careless way in which Salmon’s notes – or perhaps Thomson’s manuscript – were converted into print at the Smithsonian Institution. The editing and typesetting of the text clearly indicate an unfamiliarity with Polynesian languages and Thomson probably never had the opportunity to correct the proofs (cf. von Heine Geldern 1938:826-831, 844-847; Fischer 1997:85-103).

Scholarly attention has been primarily drawn to the texts labeled Atua Matariri (Métraux 1940:320-324; Fischer 1997:94-100) and Eakahia Ariki Ariki Kete (Métraux 1937:52-54, 1940:133-134). Two other, shorter texts have been dismissed as modern-type songs (Routledge 1919:248; Fischer 1997:100-101) and the by far longest text entitled Apai, supposedly recited to pictures of tablet Keiti (Thomson 1891:517-520), has been judged as too corrupt to be interpreted with a reasonable chance of success. Von Heine-Geldern (1938:847), however, believed that in spite of the errors in recitation, notation, and translation, Apai was probably the most interesting, not only of Thomson’s collection but of all preserved Rapanui texts. Although he did not clarify what lead him to this opinion and never published anything further on the subject, his appraisal has been shared by other researchers.3 Barthel (1959:168), for example, included Apai in the group of precious Rapanui traditions which were handed down as rongorongo tablet chants, while at the same time characterizing the text as “heavily distorted, not yet adequately edited, English translation unusable” (1959:171, en. 46; my translation). He, too, failed to publish anything further on the enigmatic text.

This study seeks to remedy this unsatisfactory situation by presenting a reconstruction of the original text and an annotated translation. It will hopefully demonstrate that the interpretation of Apai is not as hopeless an undertaking as has hitherto been thought.

Story

The Apai text relates an episode from the ongoing cosmic struggle between the Polynesian gods Tangaroa, the lord of the ocean and its inhabitants, who is also often associated with the night and the underworld, and his brother Tane, who manifests himself in the sun, in birds and forests, i.e., in the opposite domains of land, sky, and light. Tane is also connected to fertility and appears in several Polynesian traditions as creator of mankind. His name, however, is not found in traditional Easter Island myth, probably because his properties were transferred to other deities such as Makemake (Métraux 1940:314). In the beginning of Apai, he appears as Teko, a personage who also occurs in the well-known legend of Tangaroa’s landing at Tongariki in the guise of a seal (Métraux 1940:310-311). After Tangaroa’s attempt to make himself king of the island has met with an unfortunate end in the earth oven of his subjects-to-be, it is his brother “Teko with the long legs” who comes striding over the ocean to look for him. As the myth states that Tangaroa’s mana was “over the sea” while that of his brother was “over the land”, it is not difficult to recognize in the latter the “Sky Propper” of Māori fame. The Apai text confirms this identification by presenting the Teko figure as a personification of the sun (which will be written here as “Sun”). The provenance of his long legs becomes apparent as they are referred to as tokotokona to raa, “the beams of the Sun” (line 105). According to Best (1923:107), the Māori scholar Hare Hongi stated that “Tane poled or propped up the heavens with his long pillars or shafts of light, hence his name of Tane toko rangi. The word toko denotes a pole or prop, also ‘to prop up,’ also a ray of light.” Interestingly, the epithet appears on Easter Island as the name Tokoterangi in Métraux’s list of kings (1940:Table 2, opp. 90).

The story of Apai begins with a fishing Teko who accidentally catches the beautiful daughter of Tangaroa and becomes infatuated with her. Unfortunately, his attempt to transfer her from the depth of the ocean to his realm in the sky proves disastrous, as the girl cannot survive in his bright light. Although the affection is apparently mutual, she is forced to return to the water as her admirer is unable to control his radiance. When the girl seeks the help of her father for her desire to leave the water, Tangaroa proposes to hang her as a star in the firmament. To keep her safe, however, he intends to ban her lover from the sky. An enraged Sun then attacks the ocean in an attempt to abduct the girl by force, but he is quickly made aware of some of its formidable denizens such as the shark and the octopus. After some arguing, a compromise is reached: Tangaroa’s daughter will be positioned close to the Sun, but she will only appear in the sky when the Sun is not powerful enough to do her harm, i.e., before sunrise and after sunset. While the Sun follows his path through the sky, she will return to the safety of the ocean. The chant ends with Tangaroa creating the Milky Way to guide his daughter to her place among the stars.
Origin

The inspiration for this mythopoetic narrative clearly came from the observation of certain astronomical phenomena – in particular the movements of the sun and the planet Venus. The orbit of Venus lies inside that of the Earth, which means that to an earthly observer, the planet never ventures more than about four hours or 47 degrees from the sun. The “impossible love affair” between the sun god and the photophobic daughter of Tangaroa in the Apai story elegantly explains why the sun and the planet are never seen together in the sky, despite the fact that they apparently stand in such close relationship to each other.

The girl is called a tapairu, which is a widespread Polynesian title for the (firstborn) daughters of royalty. It is also the name for certain classes of fairies who were renowned for their great beauty (Tregear 1891:470). These usually female supernatural beings are often associated with bodies of water and described as fearful of daylight (e.g., Gill 1876:256-258, 265).

Gill (1876:256) translates tapairu as “peerless one”, a description which is also very fitting for Venus, at her maximum visible magnitude by far the most brilliant celestial body after the sun and moon (Kelley & Milone 2011:38). Moving from inferior conjunction to superior conjunction with the sun, the planet is seen in the east preceding the rising sun as the “Morning Star” until she disappears in the sunlight. The text describes how the Sun promises not to rise until the rooster’s morning crow, thus allowing the tapairu to spend some time with him outside the sea. When the Sun’s harmful light intensifies above the horizon, she leaves the sky, apparently returning to her father’s care while the Sun runs his daily course.

When from the earth’s point of view Venus appears on the other side of the sun – moving from superior to inferior conjunction – the planet becomes visible as the “Evening Star”. After sunset, she appears in the western sky and starts moving towards the horizon, following in the wake of her “partner”. In the chant, Tangaroa enables his daughter to ascend after darkness has set in: “When the stars come together, you will hang among them” (lines 79-80; 88-89). She then disappears below the horizon into the “jaws” of her father, the ocean, waiting to rise again. This setting of the sun and Venus is described by Tangaroa with the words: “You will (both) grow dark in the West” (line 181).

The descriptions in Apai match the characteristic Venusian positions and movements in relation to the solar trajectory in a way that an identification of the tapairu with the moon, a superior planet or a bright star does not. The only substantial adjustment made by the story is the “alignment” of the complete synodic period of the planet, spanning an average of 584 days, and the twenty-four hour cycle of the sun. This connection of the tapairu to the whole period provides an interesting piece of information regarding pre-contact astronomical knowledge as it shows that the “Morning Star” appearing in the eastern sky and the “Evening Star” of the west were recognized as the same celestial object. This is apparently contradicted by the existence of two different Rapanui names for Venus, hetuu popohanga (“Morning Star”) and hetuu ahiahi (“Evening Star”). However, Kelley & Milone (2011:419), among others, have argued that this would be an unwarranted conclusion: “A group, or some members of it, may be well aware that Venus seen in the west as Evening Star is the same body as Venus seen in the east as Morning Star. However, that does not preclude using a different myth/analog for the two positions, which will make it immediately clear where Venus is.”

Reconstruction

Although at first glance the Apai text seems far too corrupt to allow for a reliable reconstruction, under closer scrutiny the situation reveals itself as less hopeless. The main reason for this is that certain regularities can be traced in the errors. This is especially facilitated by the many repetitions that are usually spelled and segmented in various ways (see the appendix on p. 37 for an inventory of comparable phrases). The incomprehensible phrase tapui rurenga in line 10, for example, can be compared to tapairu renga, “beautiful princess”, occurring in line 20. This tapairu in turn can be related to tapaini in line 29, tapo iru nei in line 32, tapui rei in lines 39, 47, 48, tapo rei in line 55 and tapa iru in line 108. In a similar way, words written as rau (14, 23, 105), kan (16), rara (46), ria (74), ra (76), ran (93), rā (94, 95) and Ra (182) can be equaled to raa (“sun”, modern spelling ra’a or ra’ā). When errors of this type are corrected, the text gradually emerges as a coherent and intelligible whole that provides a framework for some calculated guesses for the parts that remain obscure.

The inaccuracies, inconsistencies and omissions that occur in the published text can be divided roughly into two categories, the ones made “by ear” and those made “by eye”. The former resulted from Salmon writing down the words of Ure Vaeiko and the latter were added by the editor or typographer of the Smithsonian Institution misreading these notes. It is possible that some were already made by Thomson if he copied them into his written report. A partial transcription of Thomson’s lost manuscript exists at the Bishop Museum, which according to Métraux (1940:31) contains fewer mistakes than the published version. Unfortunately, judging by the comparison of Fischer (1997:585, en. 25), its fragment of Apai has very little to offer for a better understanding.
Salmon had to depend solely on Ure Vaeiko’s pronunciation for the spelling of words which were unfamiliar to him. This has primarily resulted in an inaccurate and irregular orthography, especially in the notation of vowels that are phonetically close such as /o/ and /u/ (the perfect tense marker is written both as ko (66, 146, 158, 199) and ku (47), the inalienable benefactive case marker as mo (3, 55, 130, 163, 171) and mu (40, 104, 125), /a/ and /e/ (e.g., vake for vaka (81, 91), kore for korua (181), tamara for te maru (24)) and /e/ and /i/ (te teri for tetere (194), kote for koli (31)). There is some inconsistency in the representation of /ŋ/, which is usually written as “ng” (tangata (2), renga (10), rangi (103)), but also appears as “n” (honâ (3)) and “g” (uga (198)). The glottal stop occasionally surfaces as “hi” (hura for ‘ura (23), taho for tu’o (12)), “k” (kina for ‘ina (14)) or in a vowel change (ouku for o’oku (189)) and there are a few indications of vowel length, either by duplicating the vowel (ariiki (100)) or adding a circumflex (ā (110), rā (94)).

This far from dramatic situation would have been relatively easy to correct had it not been so seriously aggravated by the editing and typesetting process at the Smithsonian, which apparently was undertaken without proper background knowledge of Polynesian languages. The majority of these additional errors are confusions of similar-looking letters, particularly consonants. Barthel has already pointed to the substitutions “u” for “n”, “i” for “k” (1957:65, fn. 31), “n” for “u”, “o” for “a”, and “r” for “v” (1958:218, fn. 2). The most common of these is the switch of “n” and “u” (examples of “n” for “u” are tautau for tau tau (27), hun for hua (56), hetu for hetu (79), examples of “u” for “n” are hahiwi for hahine (101), mahau for mahani (186), uapa for nape (196)). Several other substitutions can be added to Barthel’s set, such as “u” for “v” (pa uoko for paroko (120), uake for rake (140)), “v” for “n” (rei for nei (32)) and vice versa (tun ama for turama (24)) and “h” for “t” (hainu for tai no (105)) and vice versa (atara for ahara (69)).

The segmentation of the lines into words is very erratic, something which may have been caused by Salmon’s unclear spacing. It is also evident that the editor did not compare similar passages, which could have prevented a number of mistakes, e.g., kari mao (30), kiri mai (41), kairi mai (33, 50) for ka iri mai. Errors which appear to be the result of downright sloppiness are omitted letters (e.g., tahri for tahuri (11), k for ki (16), mirunga for mairunga (132)) and swapped letters and syllables (heuna for henua (113), kakae for kakea (162), irunga for irungia (145), kahonotake for ka noho haharua ke (99)).

In a number of cases, it remains uncertain at which stage the fault was produced. It cannot, for example, be excluded that kakaha for kakava (1) was already present in Ure Vaeiko’s recitation, but it is equally possible that he was misunderstood by Salmon or that the letter “v” was mistaken for an “h” by the editor.

With the exception of a few brief fragments, the accompanying translation by Ure Vaeiko and Salmon can only be qualified as totally inaccurate. The incoherent account patently shows that the informant nor his interpreter had any real understanding of the text. Their failure to recognize keywords such as tapairu (“princess”), hapai (“to lift up”), hetu (“star”) and raa (“sun”), demonstrates that the story’s basic theme completely eluded them. Although the vocative constructions e Tangaroa e (52) and e te ahine ariki e (188) clearly hint at the presence of direct speech and different speakers, they simply rendered the text as a continuous narrative.

As far as a method can be detected in their approach, it must have consisted primarily of selecting words that looked familiar and stringing them together into more or less coherent sentences. Obscure phrases were occasionally turned into proper names (e.g., Mohouakuta (3), Era Nuku (68), Manana Take (102)), but in most cases, the remaining text was simply ignored. For example, in the fragment published as piri tamu ara te uaua na heke (124-125), Tangaroa warns the Sun of what will happen if he tries to invade his ocean territory and should be read as piri ata mo ara te ta-ua na heke; “(You) will encounter (my) ‘shadow’ if the octopus arouses (his) tentacles!” The translation “... the branches were laced together like muscles. Heke was the builder of these roads” is clearly constructed around the selection of piri (“to come together”), tama (“stick”), ara (“road”), and uaua (“muscles”), with complete disregard for word order and other rules of grammar. Where “triggers” of this type were absent, this procedure ran into problems, as can be seen in the two places where the translation is interrupted by the remark that the meaning of a particular segment had been forgotten (Thomson 1891:519). The first of these gaps can be traced to lines 110-112, describing the attack of the manta ray or haharua, a word that was evidently no longer understood. As a result, the surrounding text failed to offer anything intelligible and the passage was therefore declared to have been written “in some ancient language.”

**Presentation**

The published chant is reproduced here unaltered, except for the segmentation of the lines and some words that were erroneously joined together (the latter’s separation is indicated by a hyphen enclosed in parentheses). In the reconstructed text, the types of errors discussed above have been corrected as much as possible. To facilitate the comparison of original and reconstruction, no further attempt has been made to correct or modernize the spelling. Another
consideration for this choice is that for many words, the exact 19th century phonetics can only be guessed at. To suggest otherwise, for the whole text or parts of it, could only impede future improvements. This means that the glottal stop which was only gradually introduced in 20th century transcriptions remains absent and that /ŋ/ is written as “ng”. Stress and vowel length are likewise left unmarked. Words that for other reasons deviate from the spellings in the vocabularies of Churchill (1912), Fuentes (1960), and Englert (1978), and those that do not appear in these works, are annotated. The scarce and random punctuation of the original (commas, full stops, dashes) has been omitted, as well as the occasional capital letter – except for those in proper names. Words of which the reconstruction is very uncertain are followed by a question mark enclosed in parentheses.

The *Apaï* text consists mainly of the conversation between the three characters who have already been discussed: Tangaroa, the god of the ocean, who is also referred to as “god” and “king”, his daughter, whose title *tapairu* has been translated as “princess”, and her admirer, the sun god, who appears in the beginning as “Teko”, but for the rest is alternatingly called “sun” and “god”. Their discussion is interspersed by a number of explanatory segments in which an anonymous, uninvolved, and all-knowing fourth “voice” narrates the developments that are not discussed by the dramatis personae. These parts are helpful to distinguish between the different speakers, as these are not indicated separately in the text. The lines of this “narrator” are marked in the translation by “N”.

Since the “translation” of Ure Vaeiko and Salmon is of very little value, it does not need to be reproduced here. Where it is of use to correct the published chant, this is mentioned in the notes. The proposed translation has been kept very close to the reconstructed Rapanui text and may therefore appear somewhat awkward at times. The word order in most of the sentences that have an object is VOS. The translation uses the passive voice for these verbs to emphasize the deviation from the standard VSO order (with the object marked by “i”) and to draw attention to the infrequent presence of agentive “e”. For the purpose of readability, omitted subjects and objects have been added where appropriate, as well as a number of possessive pronouns, conjunctions, and interjections (all enclosed in parentheses). Alternatives to some uncertain interpretations are presented in the notes.

The process of reconstruction has been focused on extracting meaning while staying as close to the original text as possible. For this reason and due to the fact that so much about the phonetics of the old language is uncertain, no attempt has been made to fit the text into any of the metrical schemes which have been proposed for Polynesian chants, such as the so-called “Rule of Eight”. The impact that such an approach would have on the text is very clearly illustrated by Fischer’s metrical reconstruction of the *E timo te akoako* chant (1994:425-434).

### The Apai text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thomson (1891:517-518)</th>
<th>Reconstruction</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Timo te kakaha piki</td>
<td>timo te kakava piki</td>
<td>Princess: (My) chest is pierced by cramps!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apai te roria aruki e tangata</td>
<td>hapai te rori a ariki e tangata mo onga kuta</td>
<td>N: Is the noose on the princess pulled up by a man?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohonākuta</td>
<td>mo onga matangi e iri</td>
<td>If (she) sees the foam,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mohonga matangi e iri</td>
<td>hapai aira Teko i te ika</td>
<td>if (she) sees the air, (she) must be going up!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 apai ia ra Techo i te ika</td>
<td>mao i rua matangi</td>
<td>Teko is there pulling up the “fish”!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maho i rau matangi</td>
<td>hapai te rori</td>
<td>Princess: Leave (me) alone because the air makes (me) sick!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apai tiori</td>
<td>mao i rua matangi</td>
<td>N: (He) goes on pulling up the noose!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mahoi rau matangi</td>
<td>tao i tea-tea tau</td>
<td>Princess: Leave (me) alone because the air makes (me) sick!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tahoi te thahoi</td>
<td>haka-viri ia tapairu renga</td>
<td>(My) fairness will be charred by (your) attacks!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 hakavirri ia tapui rurenga</td>
<td>tahuri te ika</td>
<td>N: The beautiful princess causes him to drop (her).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tahri te ika</td>
<td>tao i tea-tea e tau ira</td>
<td>The “fish” returns (to the water).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tahoi te ata e tau ira</td>
<td>tau ana mimi</td>
<td>Princess: (My) fairness will be charred by (your) attacks there!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tau na mimi</td>
<td>hara Raa ina atarangi</td>
<td>(I) will be affected if (you) shower (me)!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hara rau kina ata rangi</td>
<td>noho no</td>
<td>The sunlight is wrong (for me), there is no shadow!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 no no</td>
<td>topa Raa ki mata</td>
<td>(I) will stay (in the water)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tupa kan k maka</td>
<td>ravaa tea e tau ira</td>
<td>(or) the sunlight will fall on (my) figure!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reva atea e tau ira</td>
<td>mataku</td>
<td>N: (Her) fairness will be taken away by (his) attacks there!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>matuku</td>
<td>hara atarangi</td>
<td>(She) will be in danger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hara atarungi</td>
<td>noho no tapairu renga</td>
<td>(because) there is no shadow!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 no no tapairu renga</td>
<td>ava ki hoa(-)</td>
<td>The beautiful princess stays (under water),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ava ki hoa(-)</td>
<td>too oona kata-kata</td>
<td>far away from (her) admirer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to. Houa kata-kata</td>
<td>ura ma tini Raa</td>
<td>(II) takes away her joy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hura matini rau</td>
<td></td>
<td>(but) she will be burned with the Sun right overhead!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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hanga tamaru kia tun ama
25 tavake
toto tumakeuka
tantan mea te kura.
Ki hi
honga te kura e aku tapaini
30 kari mao aku hoa-hoa
tae kote kura.
matata ki aaku tapa iru nei
kairi mai aku hora-hora
tae kote kura.
35 Mata ki rei mata ku
haka iri mara(-)
i matair maru
matai maru
ka irira tapui rei tupa(-)
40 i ranga muku
kiri mai aku hoa-hoa
tae kote kura.
Mata ki rei mata ku
haka iri maru
45 matai maru
matai rara
ku uira tapui rei
tapu rei tupa
ranga muku
50 kairi mai aku hora-hora
kapaianga mai.
E. tangaroa te
mare kura
hapaia e haka ihi
55 mo topa rei kura tapo rei
hun atu aau
tae haath rangi
ura rangi
hara-tua
60 oaku matua
oaku ma tenga
otae ahiri noa
ranga ki te rangi
no te munirri a rua
65 hiru te hetu takiri
ko mumu ana kia kake
mao-mao ake.
Haka tau Era a Nuku te atua.
Atara kabiria a uka hopua.
70 Tun haka maua kura.
Te te ha hei kura.
Te to tieduituri kura.
Te tun te matangi
e ria a mangaro.
75 Tun tahake
oi taura
te herunga taku ohu
tutuhi nga tanku mato
kapipiri to hetun
80 tan aranga
noi ruga vake
noi runga. – Marua(-)
uu ha heire mana
mahahine maua(-)
85 iira takake.
Te herunga taku ohu

hanga te maru ki turama
taha ke
toto turama ki uka
tau-tau mea te kura
ki hihi
onga te kura e aaku tapairu
ka iri mai aaku hora-hora
tae koti kura
mataki nei aaku tapairu nei
ka iri mai aaku hora-hora
tae koti kura
mataki nei mataku
haka-iri maru
i mataki iri maru
mataki maru
ka iri ra tapairu tapu
i ranga moooku
ka iri mai aaku hora-hora
tae koti kura
mataki nei mataku
haka-iri maru
mataki maru
mataki Raa
ko ui ra tapairu
tapairu tapu
ranga moooku
ka iri mai aaku hora-hora
mataki nei mataku
haka-iri maru
mataki maru
mataki Raa
ko ui ra tapairu
ranga moooku

Tangaroa:(She) needs the shadow against (your) flares!
(You) will stay apart!
Those flares are harmful for the girl!
People are very much affected by (your) light!
When (you) shine,
the light will be seen by my princess!
Sun: When my radiance appears,
the light will not be interrupted!
Tangaroa:(Then) my princess will see (it)!
Sun: When my radiance appears,
the light will not be interrupted!
Tangaroa:(I) see the danger
(so) (I) will raise the shadows!
When (you) look at (her), the shadows will go up!
Sun: (I) am looking at the shadows!
When (I) rise, the princess is taboo!
(She) is banished for me!
When my radiance appears,
the light will not be interrupted!
Tangaroa:(I) see the danger
(so) (I) will cause the shadows to go up!
(You) will be looking at the shadows
(or) (she) will see the sunlight!
Sun: (I) am looking for the princess,
(but) the princess is taboo!
(She) is banished for me!
when my radiance appears!
Princess: When (he) lifts (me) up,
:o Tangaroa,
the light will wound (me)!
(He) pulls (me) up, (but) (he) creates those rays!
Tangaroa:If the light falls (on you), my princess,
(you) will be burned by that other god!
Without shadow,
the sky will be on fire!
Princess: (You) surround (me),
my father.
Let’s hope (it) will not be the death of me,
because (I) will never go up!
Tangaroa:(I) am going to send (you) to the sky,
(so) from then on (you) will dwell (there) together!
N: (She) will be like the stars going round.
When (they) come together, she will ascend.
That ascent will bring (her there).
That place there will be made hospitable by the god
while that girl from the sea lovers (up there),
(She) will arrive (and) the sunlight will be restrained.
The light that circles around will be repelled.
The light that stings will be repelled.
The wind will be repelled,
the Sun will be tamed!
Tangaroa:(You) will arrive (and) stay separate
lest the Sun affects (you)!
Sun: (That is) interfering with my trajectory!
(That is) banning my presence!
Tangaroa:When the stars come together,
(she) will hang among (them),
(she) will dwell above the houses!
Sun: She and I will dwell up there,
if we two circle there!
If we want to be together,
(we) will not be separated (by you)!
(That is) interfering with my trajectory!
matone uake te nauai
no hirunga vaka-vaka
aka pipiri râ
ka pipiri te hetu,
tau avanga
tau avanga
kahonotake
ka noho taha ke
Tangaroa: When the stars come together,
(she) will hang among (them),
(she) will dwell above the houses!
Sun: We both will dwell above the houses!
Tangaroa: If (you) go near (her),
you will upset (her), Sun,
because (she) will be hit by (your) aggressive fire, Sun!
Sun: If (you) come close to (her),
you will upset (her), Sun,
because (she) will be corrupted by (your) fire!
Sun: (I) must shine but (I) must (also) be close to (her)!
Tangaroa: (You) must stay apart!
M. de Laat
Ascension: proposal for a reconstruction of Ure Vaeiko’s Apai recitation

150 e oho te nauai
e raite nauai
nauai nauai kino
nohavava
tauakateketeirangaetini

155 haamatauauknino
katangiote moko-mokouri
katangiote moko-mokotea
kohao kopiireuta
moko-moko uauru

160 moko-mokotea
takaiirangi
kakae holei eta te atua.
Mohao
haruruvai e

165 kahihingama te touga(-)
kaptitrangi
moko-mokouri
moko-mokotea
kohao kopiireata
kahuhinga ma te Tonga
kahuhinga ma te Tonga

170 mamairirauahai
du atimoe grabahanuwa
kahuhuamo te Tonga
kahuhizinga ma te Tonga

175 nui
kahingiano Tongarou
kaptitirangi
moko-mokouri
moko-mokotea

180 pruho kaunahai
uru koruei hangaroa
a Timeo eae e te Ra(-)
ki eteroetaua
erua aaku manu.

185 Hakarongo noiatetereoreoteama
vai-vai-mahauia
ureroroerenga
ahaio nei eateahiuaiirikitoukia

190 varimarianiaihopu(-)
eharae
erearaeanauietautahauiku
raveraveahiro
kaiteterihepo

195 etaoeokehoki
uapatetegoatuaika
komumu marangamangatua
ko pephu ko pepetangi.

200 ko pepetangi
taravi tavi.
ko pepetangitava
taravi tavi
ehakanui

205 koekitehu
koe kiketepuapuapuna
Tun hitu
hare
kamorekoe

210 kapaitue.

You must ascend in (its) wake!
You must break free,
(they) will be (your) home!
(You) will reach the stars,
(you) going into the fog!
(You) will become magnificent,
(summoning in the distance:
(She) went on following that call in the distance,
(summoning in the distance.
(She) followed that call,
(She) followed, (she) followed (its) call.
(as) it was ordered by the god.
(When) (the stars) came together, (it) rose up,
(When) (it) will be called our “fish”!
(You) have been swimming in these still waters,
(Is this “fish” of mine really going to depart?
(You) will (both) grow dark in the West!
(You) are going to wait if (she) rises, o Sun,
(Therefore) (my) jaws will close completely.
(You) will (both) grow dark in the West!
(You) will become (too) intense (for you)!
(You) will (be) near that god again
(He) will take away the darkness
(He) will take away (your) fairness!
(You) will (both) grow dark in the West!
(He) will regret taking away the darkness
(You) will (be) near that god again
(He) will take away the darkness
(He) will take away (your) fairness!
(He) must go past those bites!
There will be many bites!
Those bites will be vicious bites!
(He) will remain at a distance!
The sharks will attack until (he) retreats up there!
(He) will be disciplined by (their) vicious bites!
(He) will regret taking away the darkness
Outside (the water) (you) have met with that god!
(He) will take away the darkness of the waves,
(He) will take away (your) fairness!

Princess: (I) will join (him) in the sky!
(I) will be near that god again
if (I) go outside (the water)!

Tangaroa:(But) the both of you will separate
when (he) starts shining from the East!
When (he) climbs into the sky,
(he) will take away the darkness
(he) will take away (your) fairness!
(Your) jaws will open wide overthere!
Behind (them) (I) will be waiting to rise!

Tangaroa:(But) the both of you will separate
when (he) starts shining from the East!
When (he) starts shining from the East,
(he) will become (too) intense (for you)!
When (he) climbs into the sky,
(he) will take away the darkness
(he) will take away (your) fairness!
(You) should open wide for it again!
(He) you will (be) near that god again
(You) mind is disgusted by this quarrel!
(Therefore) my (jaws) will close completely.
You will (both) grow dark in the West!
(You) are going to wait if (she) rises, o Sun,
(Therefore) (my) jaws will close completely.
You will (both) grow dark in the West!
When (he) climbs into the sky,
(he) will become (too) intense (for you)!
(You) will (both) grow dark in the West!
(You) are going to wait if (she) rises, o Sun,
(Therefore) (my) jaws will close completely.

Sun: Yes, my thoughts are sick (of it)!
(He) will always obey the voice of the rooster!
That routine will separate (us)!

N: (Tangaroa’s) head turns to the beautiful girl.
Tangaroa: What happens now, o royal maiden?
Is this “fish” of mine really going to depart?
(You) have been swimming in these still waters,
(You) may lose you way!
(You) will always obey the voice of the rooster!
That routine will separate (us)!

N: When the (stars) came together, (it) rose up,
(as) it was ordered by the god.
(You), (She) followed, (she) followed (its) call.
(She) followed that call,
(summoning in the distance.
(She) went on following that call in the distance,
(summoning in the distance:

Tangaroa:(You) will become magnificent,
you (going) into the mist,
you (going) into the fog!
(You) will reach the stars,
(they) will be (your) home!
You must break free,
(you) must ascend in (its) wake!
Commentary

The language abbreviations that are used are: HAW: Hawaiian; MAO: Māori; MFA: Mele-Fila; MIA: Mangaian; MOR: Moriori; MQA: Marquesan; MVA: Mangarevan; PEN: Penrhyn; PN: Polynesian (reconstructed); PUK: Pukapukan; RAR: Ratongan; REN: Rennellese; TAH: Tahitian; TIK: Tikopian; TOK: Tokelauan; TUA: Tuamotuan (in accordance with the Polynesian Lexicon Project (POLLEX), Biggs et al. 2013).

1. timo: MAO: timo: “to peck, as a bird”, “to puncture”, “to strike with a pointed instrument” (Tregear 1891:512).

2. hapai: according to Barthel (1958:20), the German archeologist K. Günther suggested that the chant’s name was taken from the fifth word, apai. The word is spelled as hapai in line 54. According to Fischer (1997:585, en. 27), apai is Rapanui hapai: “to raise, lift up”.


4. Teko: the name is written as Techo, which can be compared to Salmon’s spelling of chiu for kiu in the second line of the chant published as Ate-a-rena hokan iti poherae (Thomson 1891:526). To my knowledge, the figure of Teko – whose name is rendered by Métraux (1940:311) as “Teko-of-the-long-feet” – has thus far not been associated with Tane. In an earlier published version of Tanagera’s landing on Easter Island, the name of the brother is given as “el gigante Teteko” (Vives 1960:773); kutakuta: “espuma”; teatea te kutakuta o te va i kava i te vave: “blanca es la espuma del mar cuando hay olas grandes” [white is the foam of the sea when there are big waves] (Englert 1978:183).

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9. fairness: the beauty of the fairy-like beings called tapairu is especially connected to their light complexion. Tangaroa, to whom they often stand in a special relationship, is also described as “fair” or “red”, as is for example expressed by the name Tangaroa-mea (Métraux 1940:310). In Hawai’i, it was said that “Kanaloa was a tall god with a fair skin who usually appeared in human form, while his companion, Kane, was dark, with curly hair and thick lips” (Thrum 1923:260), and on Mangaia, fair-haired people were considered to be Tangaroa’s progeny as “the god himself had sandy hair” (Gill 1876:13).

10. princess: that tapairu is a title and not a proper name can be deduced from the definite article te preceding the word in line 108. The term also occurs marked in this way in the ninth verse of the chant Eaha to ran ariki kete (Thomson 1891:523). Métraux (1937:53) translates tapairu in that context as “chiefess”. As the girl in Apan is the daughter of “king” Tangaroa and is also addressed as ahine ariki, “royal daughter/maiden”, in line 188, the translation “princess” seems appropriate. Englert (1948:285) mentions a Vai tapu iru as one of the underground holes in Roiho with fresh water. If the name originated as Vai tapairu, it would provide another example of the connection between these fairies and water.

14. atarangi: cf. MAO: atarangi: “a shadow”; HAW: akalani: “a heavenly shadow” (Tregear 1891:27). Although the word is very rare in Easter Island sources, it must have had a similar meaning, as evidenced by a chant about two neru girls: i hiva oti nga uka a torio a hoitai / eha ana e uruuru pukao / atarangi ana i e tomatomo pukao veri: “The girls Torio and Hoiata (are) in that remote place at the edge. Why would (they) be combing (their) topknots? That cave is a dark place! (Their) beautiful topknots will disappear inside!” (Rapanui text in Barthel 1960:844-845; my translation).

15. ma tini: cf. raa tini: “noon”; ki te tini te rau: “zenith” (Churchill 1912:260); tini: “(of the sun) to be right overhead” (Fuentes 1960:863); he-tini te rau: “estar el sol en el meridiano” (Englert 1948:310).

17. hiki: cf. MAO, MIA, TAH, TUA: hiki: “sunbeam”, “ray of the sun” (Tregear, 1891:66). In line 54, the word has the double vowel: hita ih, i.e., haka-hiki.


23. maru: for Rapanui, the vocabularies have only marumaru. Apparently, Tangaroa means to prevent the sunrays from penetrating certain places under the water.


26. rua: an alternative is roa: “tall”, referring to Teko or “far-reaching”, referring to the Sun.

27. send to the sky: Tangaroa is also encountered as creator of the planet Venus in a Tahitian tradition which tells of Ta’aroa installing Mercury and Venus as the left and right eye of Atea (the Sky) (Henry 1928:417).


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nuku: the word is present in most Eastern Polynesian languages for “place”, “island”, “land”, “earth”. Here, it refers to the sky or a place in the sky: cf. HAW: nua: “a wide space”, “the air”, “the firmament”; MAO: nuka: “a wide extent”, “space” (Tregear 1891:271-272). In lines 134 and 138, the word is used for a deep part of the ocean.

the sunlight will be restrained: the taming of the Sun is a motif which is also found in the popular Maui-myths. Here, however, the intention is not to prolong the day but to give the tapairu the opportunity to appear in the sky. It is not clear whether Tangaroa is also thought of as the actual initiator of the setting of the sun, as is suggested by the Sun’s utterances in lines 77-78 (repeated in 86-87).

tui-tui: the basic meaning of tui is to pierce an object (a bead, a fish) with a needle in order to thread it on a string, hence Rapanui tui-tui “necklace”, “string” (Fuentes 1960:870); tui: “coser esteras”[to sew mats], “hacer ristras”[to make strings]; tuitui: “ensartar varios objetos a string various objects” (Englert 1978:271). It is assumed that the word is used here to compare the rays of the Sun to (a circle of) stinging needles (see also the comment on line 130).

dwell above the houses: an indication of the relatively low altitude of the planet Venus.

tokotokona: cf. tokotoko: “stick”, “cane”, “crutches”, “roller”, “pole”, “staff” (Churchill 1912:261). The word refers to the long legs of Tuko, and mutatis mutandis to the rays of the Sun. Cf. Handy (1927:18): “Toko in the Maori dialect means not only ‘prop’ or ‘pole’, but also signifies ‘rays of light’...” doubtless in the sense in which English metaphor speaks of a ‘shaft of light.’ The significance of the use of this term in the cosmogonic account immediately becomes apparent in view of the fact that Tane, the separator of Heaven and Earth, was in the ancient worship the embodiment of sunlight.” In the Maori myths, the rays of the Sun are often referred to as his “legs”. The hero ensnares them in his ropes or to MAO: “another image made of the same kind of wood, representing the handsome blue shark of Ta’aroa” (Henry 1928:133). The bond between Tangaroa and the octopus (niuhi), which is explicitly described it as the product of a failed attempt to create mankind by Makemake, Tane’s reincarnation (Englert 1980:12;14). The manta ray (haahaarua) with its large “flapping” pectoral fins and its sharp, forward-pointing cephalic fins that resemble an open bird beak, is chosen as a maritime equivalent of Tane’s birds, known to Māori as nga aiaanga kapakapa a Tane, “Tane’s wing-flapping children” (Cowan 1930:58). The bond between Tangaroa and the octopus (heke), which is explicitly announced by the god as his “shadow” is especially strong in Hawai‘i where he – as Kanaloa – is god of the squid (Beckwith 1940:58). Large sea creatures, such as the shark (niuhi), were likely candidates to become Tangaroa’s ata. In a chamber on a Tahitian cult site, for example, “an image of a whale, shadow of the god Ta’aroa, made of the sacred puupuu (breadfruit) wood” was kept together with “another image made of the same kind of wood, representing the handsome blue shark of Ta’aroa” (Henry 1928:135).

data: the circumflex apparently indicates vowel length. The meaning can be deduced from the use of hue taka, “to gather around”, in a similar context in line 121. Cf. Rapanui: aa: “to surround”, which may be related to MAO: aa: “drive along”; RAR: aa: “drive away”, “chase away”; TAH: a: “a method of catching men, beasts, or fishes, by a long reach or sweep; to sweep by forming a long reach to surround and catch men, beasts &c.; TUA: aa: “charge”, “rush”, “dash after prey” (Biggs et al. 2013).

haahaarua: the word is written like this in line 121. To my knowledge, this name for the manta ray does not appear in other Rapanui texts. It is, however, widespread in Eastern Polynesia: HAW: haahaadlua; MQA: haahaau’a; MVA: ’a ara’a; PEN: haahaaurua; PUK: waawaalua; RAR: ’a’aa’rua; TOK: fafaadlua; TUA: fajafuaa (Biggs et al. 2013). On Easter Island, the meaning of the word was apparently forgotten – perhaps as a result of the demise of deep sea fishing. In modern times the animal became known under other names such as pararaha, a word which simply means “flat” and is used for all kinds of flat objects: “We have observed no rays of any kind at Easter Island. On questioning fishermen, however, some seemed to know of the presence of these fishes. The names they gave for rays were pararaha and fe’i (the latter of recent Tahitian origin)” (Randall & Cea Egaña 1984:6).


eye: an alternative translation of mata as “face” is also possible.
half of the 19th century (Métraux 1940:159) and they became known to emigrants to other islands. The word, however, may have been already present in the Rapanui language if it survived as name for other nut-bearing trees and bushes (such as the extinct indigenous palm tree). Métraux (1940:323), for example, mentions that niu was also applied to the nuts of *Thespesia populnea*. This would explain why Ure Vaïeko and Salmon translated the word as “coffee trees”.

The transformation from niuhi to niu is also found in a text connected to the birdman cult that was recorded by Routledge and published by Fischer (1997:334-335): *katuu te nui kamaroa te nui kake te nui iho pora o to hopu to manu te hapa hia he hava tota ka hopu ka titio lito to manu i te ara roa rake*, which can be reconstructed and translated as:

ka tūu te niuhi
How they approach, these sharks!
ka maroa te niuhi
How they rise from the water, these sharks!
ka kake te niuhi
How they snap, these sharks,
i te hiku pora
at the tail ends of the reed floats!
o te hopu to manu te hapai
The birdmen’s proxies are thrown in the air!
hia he ava to taka hopu
How many will remain of this gathering of hopu?
ka tito-tito te manu
How they fight, these birds,
i te ara roa rake
on that long and terrible voyage!

165 Tonga: the east is indicated as “Tonga”, apparently a reference to Tongariki in the eastern part of the island. Tangaroa has a connection to Tongariki as it was the place where he landed in his guise of a seal (Métraux 1940:310).
166 ka piki a: this reconstruction is uncertain as the only parallel phrase (177) is identical. There are, however, other examples of the confusion of “t” and “k” such as *hatahata* for *haka-taka* (128).
170 kauaha: the opening of the jaws in this line and their closing in line 180 suggest that Venus is swallowed by an enormous maw when setting below the western horizon. It is not clear whether this should be interpreted literally as a reference to Tangaroa in the shape of a giant sea creature, or simply as a metaphor for sinking into the ocean. Their lurking presence on the horizon could account for the name of a particular northeast wind called *te hāha o te kaua*e, “the opening of the jaws” (Charlin Ojeda 1947:86). A similar imagery is found in the Society Islands, where the upper jaw of Ta’aroa is said to rest on Bora Bora and his lower jaw on Huahine – islands that are some 80 km apart (T. Salmon 1904:3; as cited in Kahn 2000:11). Possibly, this jaw imagery developed in Eastern Polynesia out of a pseudo-etymological explanation of the god’s name as “Long Jaw”.

176 recline in the East: this is apparently the explanation of what happens to Venus when the “Morning Star” disappears in the light of the rising sun. The words *hinga*, “to go down”; and ro’ou, “to take care of”, suggest that the tapairu returns to the safety of the ocean (analogous to the submerging of the “Evening Star” in the west).

181 Hanga Roa: the place name is used for the west in the same way as “Tonga” stands for the east. Tangaroa’s presence in western direction is also indicated by a west wind named Tangaroa-aria (Métraux 1940:54). According to Fornander (1878:43), in Hawai’i the west was known as *Ke ala nui maewenia a kanalooa*, “the much travelled highway of Kanaloa.”

186 that routine will separate (as): when the rooster crows, the sun rises and the “Morning Star” disappears.

188 ahine: this is probably not a truncation of Rapanui vahine, “woman”, which is considered to be a Tahitian introduction (Mulloy & Rapu 1977:19-20). The same word appears several times in Metoro’s chants with one occurrence in a similar vocative construction: *e te ahine e* (Barthel 1958:187). Possibly, the term stems from Mangarevan ahine (Tregear 1899:2). However, since Mangarevan also has veine (Tregear 1899:120), Rapanui too may have had a synonym for veine, as suggested by the word for “old woman”, nuehine (Churchill 1912:234) or nuahine (Fuentes 1960:802).

190 vai mariaria: this phrase is translated by Ure Vaïeko and Salmon as “still waters”, indicating that vari of the printed text must have been vai, followed by the reduplicated form of maria. Cf. vai marie: “still water” (Churchill 1912:225); maria: “calmness”, “fair weather at sea” (Fuentes 1960:784).
192 raranga: it has been assumed that a letter, probably “g”, was omitted from Salmon’s transcription. Cf. raranga: “to weave”, “to braid” (Churchill 1912:247).

193 streak with colors: cf. hirohīo: “to streak with several colours” (Churchill 1912:205).
194 terete: the translation of Ure Vaïeko and Salmon has “away, away” in this place, showing that te tere is actually terete, the reduplicated form of tere, “to leave”, “to run”.
196 our “fish”: the Milky Way is in Polynesia often compared to a whale or a great shark. At least one Māori name connects it directly to Tangaroa: Ika-matua-a-Tangaroa: “Tangaroa is regarded as being Lord of the deeps of space; and by his ‘parent-fish’ (the Milky Way) we are to understand that it is this parent-fish which gives birth to many bright orbs or solar systems which are visible in space” (Hongi 1920:26). The concept of the Milky Way as a fish also appears in the improvised chants of Metoro. All nine rongorongo glyphs that are “read” by him as goe, i.e., ngo’e, “Milky Way”, depict sharks and sea monsters. Interestingly, all of these animals have gaping mouths and long tails (cf. Barthel 1958:177 (Bv:2.754.76); 180 (Bv:10.733); 181 (Bv:11.735), 188 (Aa5:049f.477); 189 (Aa6:494); 191 (Cb2:730); 196 (Er6:730 (2x)); 199 (Ev:8.755)). Of further note is the fact that in some parts of Polynesia, the Milky Way was regarded as the road of souls as they pass to the spirit world (Best 1922:37) and that Tangaroa was also related to death and to the underworld (cf. Scheffrahn 1965:274-280).

197 maranga: cf. MFA: maraga/raga: “rise (of sun, moon, wave)”; MOR: maranga: “arise”; RAK: maranga: “rise up”; TIK: maranga: “to rise (to the sky, to surface of water)”; TUA: maraga: “rise”, “move upwards” (Biggs et al. 2013). Rapanui vocabularies only have ranga: “usan también cuando se ven muchos peces cerca de...
Conclusions

The reconstruction shows that the Apai chant does not require major changes in order to be understood as a coherent narrative. Although some parts may have become confused and certain details may have been lost, the story line is intact and the logical development of the events suggests that the text is essentially complete. This is quite remarkable given the fact that its actual meaning was not – or was no longer – understood by the person reciting it. Most importantly, it could also be another reference to the Milky Way as Schuhmacher (1989:7) has suggested that Rapanui ngo’e is related to Hawaiian noe, “mist”, “rainspray”, and therefore means something like “star mist”.

Another indication for a pre-missionary date comes from the fact that Metoro, who improvised his chants for Jaussen between 1869 and 1874, apparently was familiar with some of the traditions recited by Ure Vaeiko. For Apai, Barthel (1958:218) has pointed, for example, to the presence of ka pipiri hetau tau vaenga (Apai lines 79-80, 88-89) in Metoro’s tablet “readings”. Assuming that the line was not merely a stock phrase, the period of their collaboration – Fischer (1997:49) suggests August 1873 – would narrow the time span for a late creation date even further, i.e., to the few years following the start of Eyraud’s missionary activities in 1864. It seems therefore probable that Apai was already an established part of Easter Island’s oral tradition well before that time. This fact and the presence of an unknown etiological tradition which has much interesting information to offer on a variety of mythological and archaeoastronomical issues, affirm von Heine-Geldern’s assertion that it could be the most valuable of Ure Vaeiko’s recitations.

The Tangaroa myth of the Apai text may have been developed locally as a spin-off of the familiar Tangaroa versus Tane scheme. Although the conflict is not the central theme, it plays a much more important role than in the two already known Tangaroa traditions: in the aforementioned myth of Tangaroa’s ill-fated landing as a seal, it has been reduced to brotherly rivalry and in the legend of the god fathering a son, it is completely absent (his brother is not even mentioned by name) (Métraux 1937:46-47). In the Apai text, however, Tangaroa still retains the features of a preeminent member of the Polynesian pantheon and his appearance as an enormous sea creature starkly contrasts that of the defenseless, human-faced seal, a degradation which may have been the result of the gradual decline of the institutions and activities with which he was traditionally associated, such as kingship and seafaring. The best evidence for this downsizing is the fact that he is actually killed by humans. The strange detail of his flesh staying raw (mea) in the earth oven may therefore have been a relatively late attempt to explain the no longer understood name of Tangaroa-mea. The myth also shows that the distinction between a god and his “shadow” had become blurred. It is therefore noteworthy that in Apai the octopus is specifically mentioned by Tangaroa as his ata, while it is clear that he himself is at the same time functioning on a different level – either as a behemoth or as the ocean personified.

Another interesting aspect of Apai is the sea god’s extensive involvement in celestial affairs, which is only hinted at in the myth about Tangaroa’s son. In that story, the child asking his foster mother for the whereabouts of his father (a typical Maui motif) receives the answer “There where there is a dark
cloud” (Métraux 1937:47). In Apai, Tangaroa is not only credited with the appearance of Venus and the Milky Way, but he may have been tampering with the sun’s trajectory and the fall of night as well (although this is less clear). His connection to the sky is also found in other parts of Polynesia: the moon, certain stars and constellations, weather phenomena, such as dark clouds, winds, storm, thunder and lightning, and the rainbow, could all be seen as manifestations of the god (cf. Scheffrahn 1965:223-228). The unlikely relationship of a daughter of Tangaroa and the Sun, an aspect of his eternal opponent, is not exceptional either. Best (1922:14), for example, has published a New Zealand tradition in which two of Tangaroa’s daughters by the name of Hine-raumati (the “Summer Maid – personified form of summer”) and Hinetakurua (the “Winter Maid – personification of winter”), become wives of the Sun.

The last point that needs to be addressed is the relevance of the Apai text for our understanding of the Easter Island script. From the fact that Ure Vaeiko was unable to read the rongorongo inscriptions does not necessarily follow that Apai is unrelated to the tablet recitations. It is quite possible that he connected it to rongorongo precisely because he had heard it recited from tablets during his employment at the court of ariki Nga’ara. Although it is highly unlikely that the chant itself is part of one of the few remaining rongorongo texts, Ure Vaeiko’s association could be an important indication that texts of this genre were among the inscriptions on wood. This opens the possibility for a structural comparison of Apai (and of Ure Vaeiko’s other recitations) and the surviving rongorongo corpus. If traditions similar to Apai have been inscribed on certain artifacts, we may expect to encounter some of the same characteristics, such as a rather abrupt beginning, substantial portions of direct speech, an exchange of dialogues without a specific indication of the speakers, repetitive patterns of shorter and longer sequences (some identical, others with variations), the use of certain stock phrases which are shared with other texts, a paucity of grammatical particles (in particular the pre-verbal tense/aspect markers) and transitive sentences that are predominantly VOS (of which the subject is not obligatory marked as agentive).

The so-called “lunar calendar” on the Mamari tablet shows that a certain amount of astronomical content is present in the inscriptions. The suggestion that we can expect this content to appear firmly embedded in a mythological context may well prove to be Apai’s most important contribution to the study of rongorongo.

Appendix (Inventory of comparable phrases listed by line number) on page 37.
Ascension: proposal for a reconstruction of Ure Vaeiko’s Apai recitation


This article has been peer-reviewed. Received 27 January 2014; accepted 24 March 2014.
Appendix: Inventory of comparable phrases listed by line number.

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