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Getting to Know You

Diego Muñoz

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

A. My interest in anthropology comes from the time when I was in high school, when I was 15 or 16 years old. It was then that I had concern and discomfort against various phenomena I observed in Chile. Not long before the country returned to democracy after 17 years of dictatorship, social actors began to appear, particularly in the context of the Mapuche protests against the construction of hydroelectric plants on their lands. This “re-emergence of the ethnic question” posed a malaise toward history. In the version of Chilean history that was taught in school, we did not speak of other peoples who were part of Chile. I’ve always had an interest in history, but I was not convinced by the story that appeared in the books. That is how I arrived at anthropology, as it allowed me to see that other Chile, see this other America and beyond.

Later, when I was in the third year of my degree in anthropology, I got my hands on an article by Grant McCall, written in Spanish. In this, McCall recounted the history of Rapa Nui, which I considered exciting and which I barely knew. I then read the Spanish version of “l’île de Pâques” by Métraux, I got McCall’s doctoral thesis, and several other articles. That year, “la Comisión de Verdad Histórica y Nuevo Trato para Pueblos Indígenas” [the Commission for Historical Truth and New Agreement for Indigenous Peoples] was organized, and several of my teachers took part. It was a very rich period for knowledge-building about the relationship between the Chilean State and indigenous peoples. In that context, I decided to continue my studies more systematically, and I was interested in the contemporary situation of the islanders of Rapa Nui, particularly concerning migration to the mainland. At that time, I received the support of two of my professors at the university, Dr. Andrea Seelenfreund and Dr. Luis Campos, who motivated me to pursue doctoral studies.

Researching Rapanui migration to the mainland had the first hints of migration to French Polynesia. I met people from the island in Santiago, I participated in organized *curantos*, I understood the importance of family relationships, and the relationships that were established between continental people and Rapanui people, on the mainland of Chile. Rapa Nui has always been written about as an isolated place, but when I started studying migration flows, that idea became more complex.



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. Apart from the work of McCall, I have always found answers in the works of Marshall Sahlins and Maurice Godelier, which have allowed me to position my own observations through time and assess changes in Rapanui society. When I read “Islands of History” by Sahlins, I found that the anthropological-historical analysis was innovative. His theoretical proposal regarding culture, myths, social change, and social structure somehow allowed me to familiarize myself with the history and culture of Rapanui in a distinctive way. Godelier has allowed me to understand the most primordial aspects of being and living in society. His book “*L’Enigme du Don*” [The Enigma of the Gift], where he discusses the old Maussian hypothesis, has been key in my reflection about contemporary Rapanui society. Moreover, his work “*Métamorphoses de la Parenté*” [The Metamorphoses of Kinship] provided a way for me to interpret changes in kinship and their influence on the entire social fabric.

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

A. One of the first “surprises” was of an ethnographic order, when I had to confront migratory memories. For example, in 2006, I met Lazaro Hotus Ika in Santiago, and he was the first to show me that there were still material links with Tahiti. Later on, another amazing moment was when I met Diego Pakarati Atamu, and he told me about when he and his brother Mariano, his father, and two uncles “went fishing” and “caught the wind”. Within a month, they had

reached Reao Atoll in the Tuamotus. So, every time I find a connection between *living history* – the memories, and *documentary history*, these are moments of surprise. During my research in Tahiti, it has been similar. At the beginning of my research, I did not consider working with genealogies, much less addressing issues of kinship, but as I have amassed my record of migratory experiences, both to the mainland of Chile and to Tahiti, the issue of kinship has prevailed. I had not imagined that there could be a link between kinship and migration, and that these ties could traverse, through genealogical memory, the entire 20th century back to the mid-19th century. Also, the link between migration and land ownership has been another unexpected aspect and I am working on this topic.

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. I honestly don't know. I think I have been persistent in pursuing what has fascinated me for years. I don't think I left anything in devoting myself to anthropology, or in devoting myself to studying issues in Rapanui society.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. There have been different times. One that was undoubtedly very important was having obtained a scholarship to study in France. It was through CONICYT (Comisión Nacional de Ciencias y Tecnología [National Commission for Science and Technology]) and the French Embassy in Chile, who funded the first four years of training for a master's and doctorate. Thanks to that scholarship and aid the Centre de Recherche et de Documentation sur l'Océanie, I could do my ethnographic research in Tahiti and Rapa Nui. The article appearing in this issue of RNJ is the result, not of a single "Eureka moment", but of several.

All of this has also had a bit of luck and chance. For example, I had encountered the first edition of *Te Mau Hatu O Rapa Nui* at a street fair in 2007. During my last visit to Rapa Nui, I met Veronique Make, who was born in Pamatai. Our conversations allowed us to trace her genealogy back several generations to reach Rapa Nui. The beauty of her genealogy is that it began on Rapa Nui, with two ancestors who followed different paths. One, Kinitino Make, would settle in Tahiti, the other, Eneriko Tori, in Mangareva. Later on, those two lines would come together in Mangareva, when the father of Veronique – Pierre Make – married Marie Paemarama who was the granddaughter Eneriko Tori, in Mangareva. This means that both great-grandparents of Veronique were Rapanui!

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in anthropology) on Rapa Nui in the future?

A. My research contributes to understanding the genealogical and memorial ties between Rapanui and Polynesia; links that have been searched for and constructed. Clearly, the Polynesian components of current Rapanui society are assumed, but we often forget that these, at least in their aesthetic and discursive components, are the product of radical changes in society in their quest to differentiate themselves from "Chilean". If we think about the early 20th century and the Chilean "abandonment", Rapanui society managed to articulate itself based on survival during the previous period, and was always open to new cultural elements, they were Chileans, as much as they were Tahitians. During the 70s, when trips to Tahiti began, Rapanui society reinvented itself again. "Ancestral" in Rapanui is not a chronological element, it is a political element. The interesting thing about this, in my mind, is that throughout its modern history, Rapanui society has gone through different stages of assimilation and differentiation, which has configured identities at certain times. My research contributes in clarifying the links that have allowed these configurations: what it is to be Rapanui today as a society and as a culture has at least two references of otherness: "Chilean" and "Polynesian", and these elements are incorporated and modified by migration experiences.

Q. What is your favorite site on Rapa Nui and why?

A. As an anthropologist, I find that social life in Hanga Roa is fascinating. In it, one can experience at least two forms of insularity. The first is that nothing you do goes unnoticed. Rapanui, non-Rapanui residents, and visitors are each observed by all. Many do not like to be talked about by others and to have their actions judged, but at the same time, they commonly talk about others. Hanga Roa is a space of encounters, of everyday social tensions, of social life.

A second insularity can be experienced when leaving Hanga Roa, escaping, going to the *campo*, to *uta*. But especially when climbing Maunā Tere Vaka, one can perceive the magnitude of Rapa Nui as an island. I have the same feeling when I do the hike from Ahu Te Peu to 'Anakena ... the desolation of the landscape, the ruins of ancient villages, the wind, the land occupied by a Rapanui who breeds horses ... All of this is very moving.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?

A. Misinformation about Rapa Nui is immense. All of the "classic" issues continue to be debated, but

sometimes with the same old arguments: the island was populated from America, the *moai* were moved in such or such a way, that there was a famine, that the hunger caused wars and cannibalism. One of the most complex issues is the idea of “mystery”. This is because “mystery” is part of a Eurocentric view. The origin of “mystery” is that Europeans could not understand how a society of nude and tattooed men and women would have been able to build and transport the statues. The mystery does not lie in the Rapanui, it is in the Eurocentric mentality. Another issue is the idea that Chile “saved” the island from leprosy ... All of that is vague and should be revised.

Several Chilean researchers are currently doing interesting things, especially to debate the idea, rooted in much of Chilean society, that Chile “saved” Rapa Nui. That idea has served to delegitimize, virulently, Rapanui rights on their island. It is common that with that argument, the Rapanui are seen as “ungrateful”. Ungrateful for what?, I ask myself. This shows a huge ignorance in mainland Chile about the history of Rapa Nui, not only about the archaeological history, but also regarding the history of Chile-Rapa Nui relations.

- Q. What’s the most important thing you’d like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Rapa Nui?
- A. I think the most important thing is the capacity to adapt that Rapanui society has demonstrated throughout its history. It’s really amazing how a community that was on the verge of extinction managed to survive and recover. Their strategies are very revealing of social and human processes that have allowed other societies, at other times, to survive. But they also allow us to understand why others disappeared.
- Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island anthropology (or those fields generally)?
- A. First, do not believe everything on the internet, and second, be willing to watch and listen. Taking enough time to interact with people is fundamental to knowing Rapa Nui in all its complexity, humanity, beauty, and conflict. Do not just stick with the picture on the postcard, but with the experience of life. It is highly recommended to have a travelogue where you record these experiences.
- Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology and anthropology?
- A. I consider dissolving the boundaries between disciplines to be very important. Little by little,

this is being done. The same global study of Rapa Nui can show us the wealth of information that an interdisciplinary analysis can bring. An ethnological analysis should approach history, and history can obtain significant contributions from ethnology, as Rapa Nui memory is alive and in a permanent process of recovery. The same happens with archaeology. Think about Alfred Métraux. He carried out a salvage ethnology project of the past and recognized some surviving elements. I had the opportunity to study Métraux’s field notebooks and one of the elements that impressed me was that he described various practices he saw, but these appear in his ethnology as “things” of the past. Métraux missed the ethnographic reality that was before his eyes, although he was aware of how important it was. Métraux was more concerned about solving the ‘mysteries’ of Easter Island than he was with understanding the organization and the way of life at that time. The paradox of this is that the book that was published by the archaeologist on mission, Henry Lavachery (*Ile de Pâques*, 1936), is rich with ethnographic descriptions of things that were seen and experienced in 1934. How much would we know if Métraux had done an ethnography of that present moment?!

- Q. What are you currently reading?
- A. Several things at once. I have just finished re-examining the book *Cartografía y conflicto en Rapanui* by Foerster, Ramírez, and Moreno Pakarati (2014, Rapanui Press) ... It has been a good guide to immerse myself in the study of land ownership, more so than other classic works. I continue to re-study Riet Delsing’s book, *Articulating Rapa Nui* (2015), as I am returning to some chapters. I’ve just started reading *Mythes et usages des mythes, autochtonie et idéologie de la terre mère en Polynésie* by Bruno Saura (2013, Peeters éditions), I have heard several comments about this work.
- Q. Credentials?
- A. Bachelor’s degree in anthropology from the Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano (UAHC), Chile. Master’s degree in ethnology and social anthropology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, France. Doctoral candidate in social sciences at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) Marsella, France. Member of the Centre de Recherche et Documentation sur l’Océanie (EHESS-AMU-CNRS), France.
- Q. Date and place of birth?
- A. 25 August 1981, Santiago de Chile.