

1962

By HOWARD LAFAY

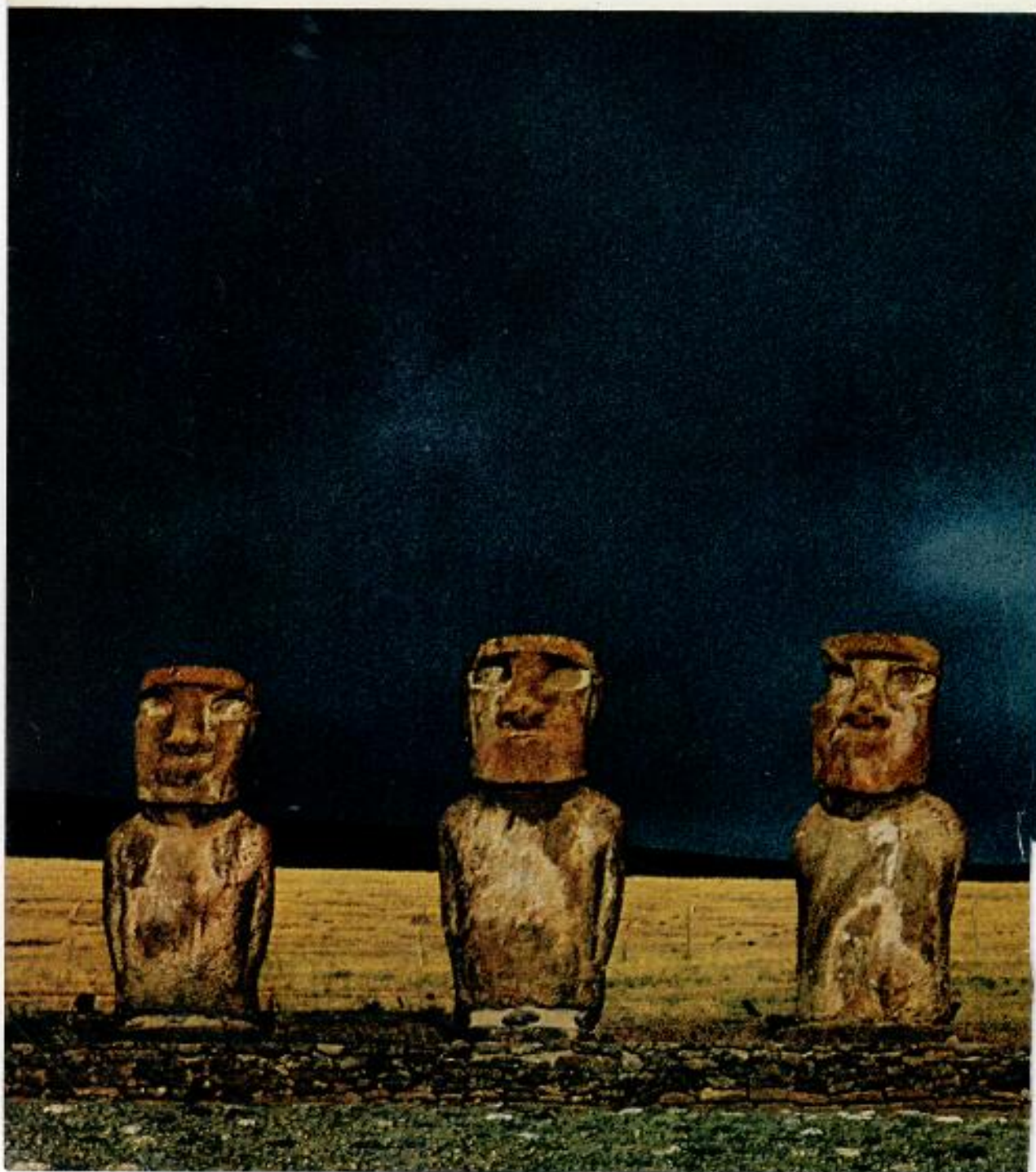
Photographs by
THOMAS J. ABERCROMBIE
National Geographic Staff

THE SOUTHERN CROSS swung low over the village of Hanga Roa, and the men and women on the porch beside me began to sing in the melting accents of Polynesia.

Here in strange harmony was the Odyssey of the Easter Islanders: The tale of the high chief, Hotu Matu'a, and the great double canoes in which he and a few daring companions had left the green shores of their homeland, knifing into the blue swell of the Pacific, their prows seeking the bursting gold of the sunrise.

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Silent survivors of a lost culture stare across a volcanic landscape under

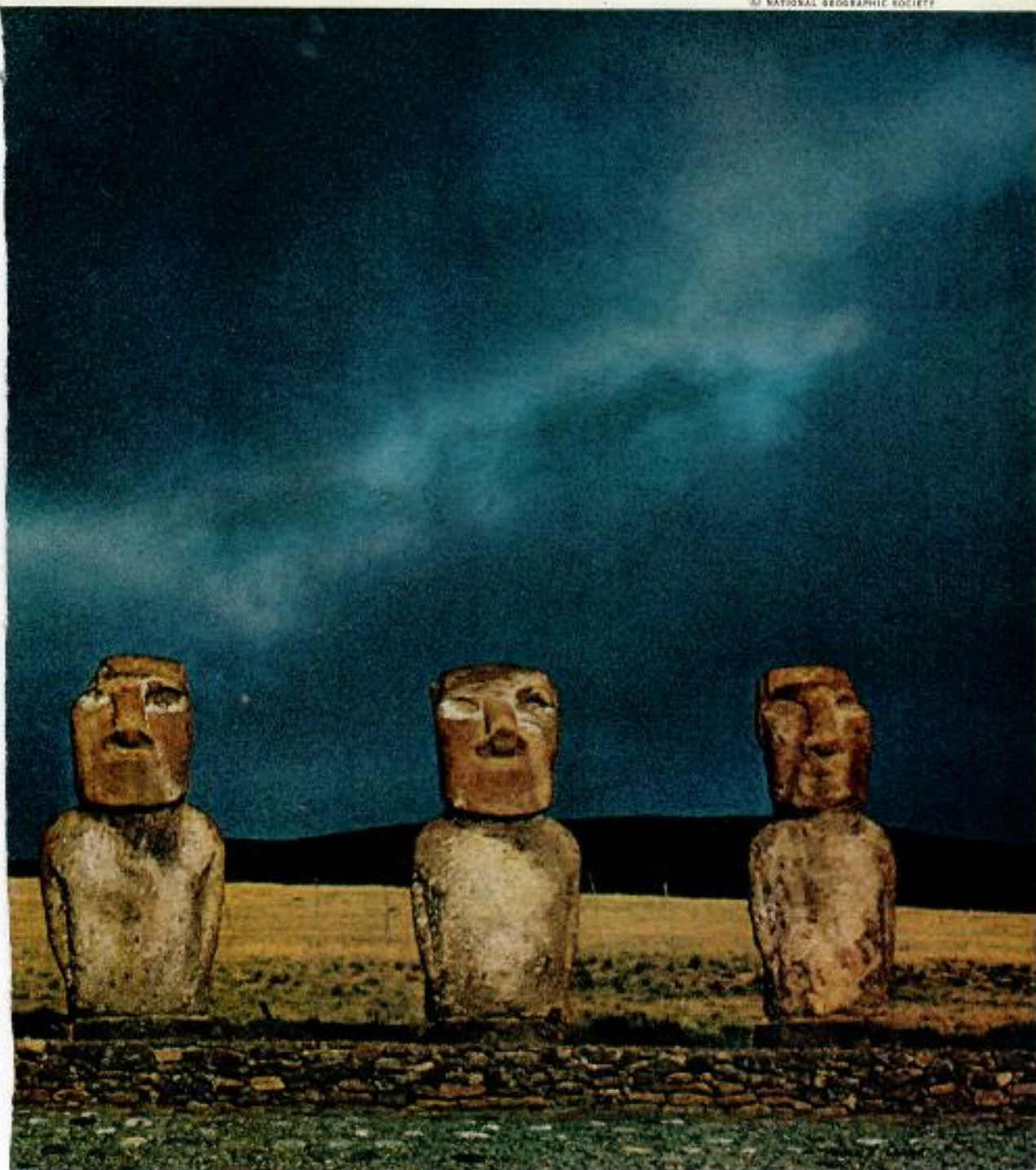


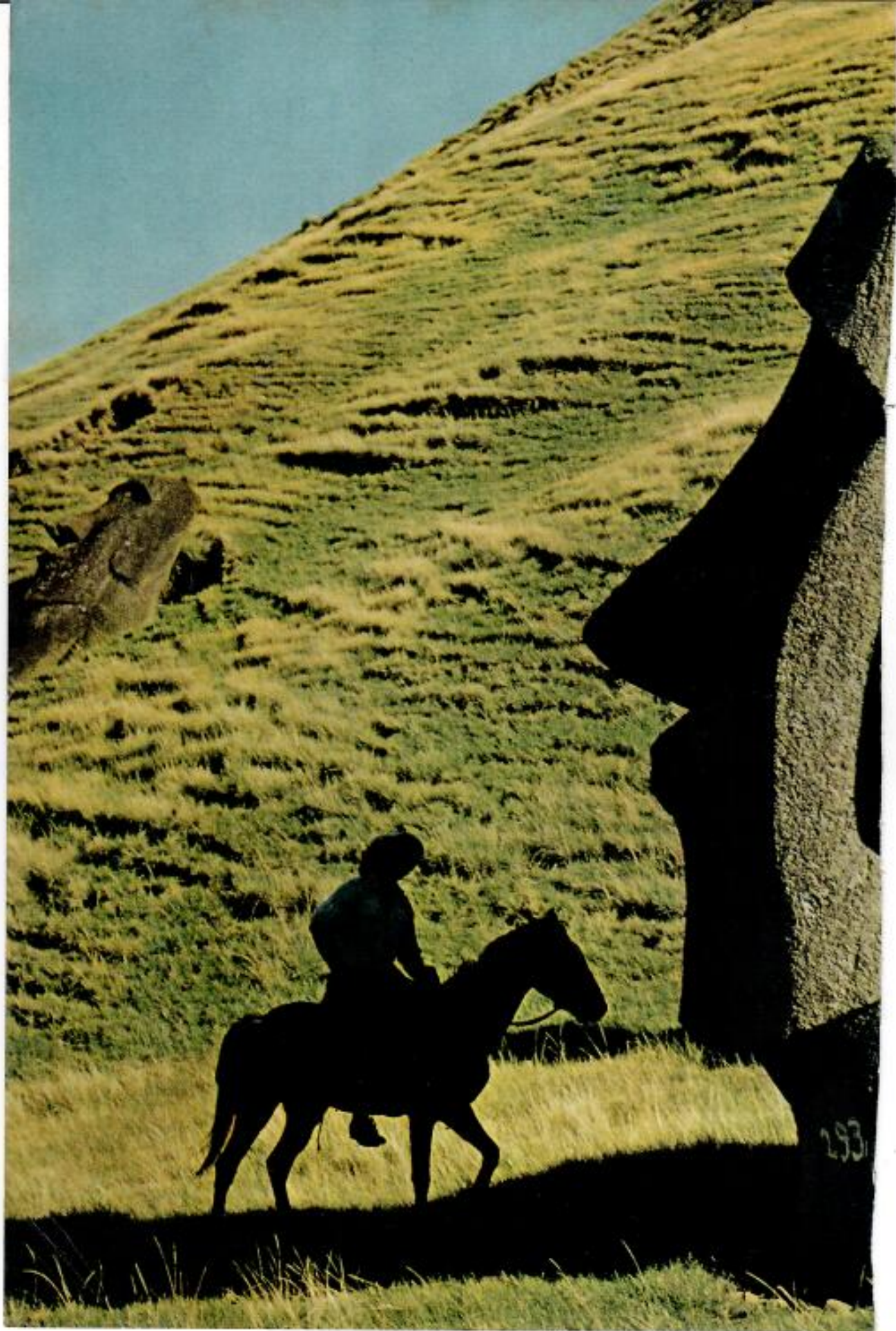
Easter Island and Its Mysterious Monuments

an approaching squall. Archeologists reset the 14-foot, 16-ton monoliths on a ruined shrine

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For the next 140 years ruthless adventurers brought violence, disease, and death to Rapa Nui. Then, in 1862, Easter's strange culture suffered its death blow.

Slavers swooped down and carried away about a thousand men to work the fetid guano deposits off the Peruvian coast. A few months later the Peruvian Government returned the 15 who survived. Smallpox came with them, and the disease ravaged the remaining islanders.

When Roggeveen stepped ashore on the Navel of the World, as the people of Easter sometimes call their island, the population stood at approximately 4,000. By 1877, it had dwindled to a scant 111. The last of the kings had died, and all memory of past greatness lay crushed beneath the island's toppled shrines.

Peace finally settled over Rapa Nui when Chile annexed it in 1888. Today the Chilean Navy administers Easter and operates an island-wide sheep farm, the sole organized industry. Its 40,000 sheep provide meat for the inhabitants and wool for export.

The children of Hotu Matu'a have once again multiplied until they number 1,011.

Small Chilean Naval and Air Force detachments add to the population. They oversee equipment which automatically records data on tides, earthquakes, and weather.

But Easter remains one of the most isolated habitations on earth. Fishing vessels stop there occasionally, and so do training ships of the Chilean Navy. But no commercial ship makes the island a port of call.

Transport Carries Civilians and Cows

Easter's principal link with the outside world is a naval transport dispatched annually by the Chilean Government to Hanga Roa, the island's only village. This transport carries supplies to see the people through the following year. It remains about two weeks, discharging cargo and loading the annual wool crop.

To reach the island, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC photographer Tom Abercrombie and I boarded the supply ship on its 1961 voyage. Though Easter has an airfield, it is used today only by an occasional Chilean Air Force plane. However, Chile plans to convert it into a big international airport, a crossroads of the Pacific.



Eastward, ever eastward sailed Hotu Matu'a, the song continued. Day followed day until there, shimmering on the horizon, he sighted the island of his destiny. Hotu Matu'a made for a protected cove on the north coast, a cove where pale emerald water lisped against a beach worthy of a king. When the canoes ground to a halt on the pink sand, his men disembarked with their stores and animals. They had found their new home.

The chanting died around me, the pulsing rhythm ebbed, and Hotu Matu'a faded back into the mists of the distant past. The singers lit cigarettes and drifted away into the sultry darkness. The little party was over.

Mystery Shrouds Vanished Glories

Beyond the porch where I stood, lay Easter Island, the remote 64-square-mile dot of land whose secrets have puzzled generations of scientists.

Who carved the statues — the great *moai* — whose stone faces stare at the visitor with sightless contempt? What is the message of the strange wooden tablets called *kohau rongo-rongo*, with their baffling picture writing? What calamity befell those imposing coastal shrines, or *ahu*, with groups of statues smashed on their stone platforms?

The traditional song I had just heard, and others like it, are providing vital clues to the history of Easter Island, or Rapa Nui as its inhabitants call it. Archeological excavations, too, are helping to unravel the enigma that has enfolded the island ever since it was first sighted from the deck of a Dutch ship, *De Afrikaansche Galei*, on Easter Sunday, 1722.

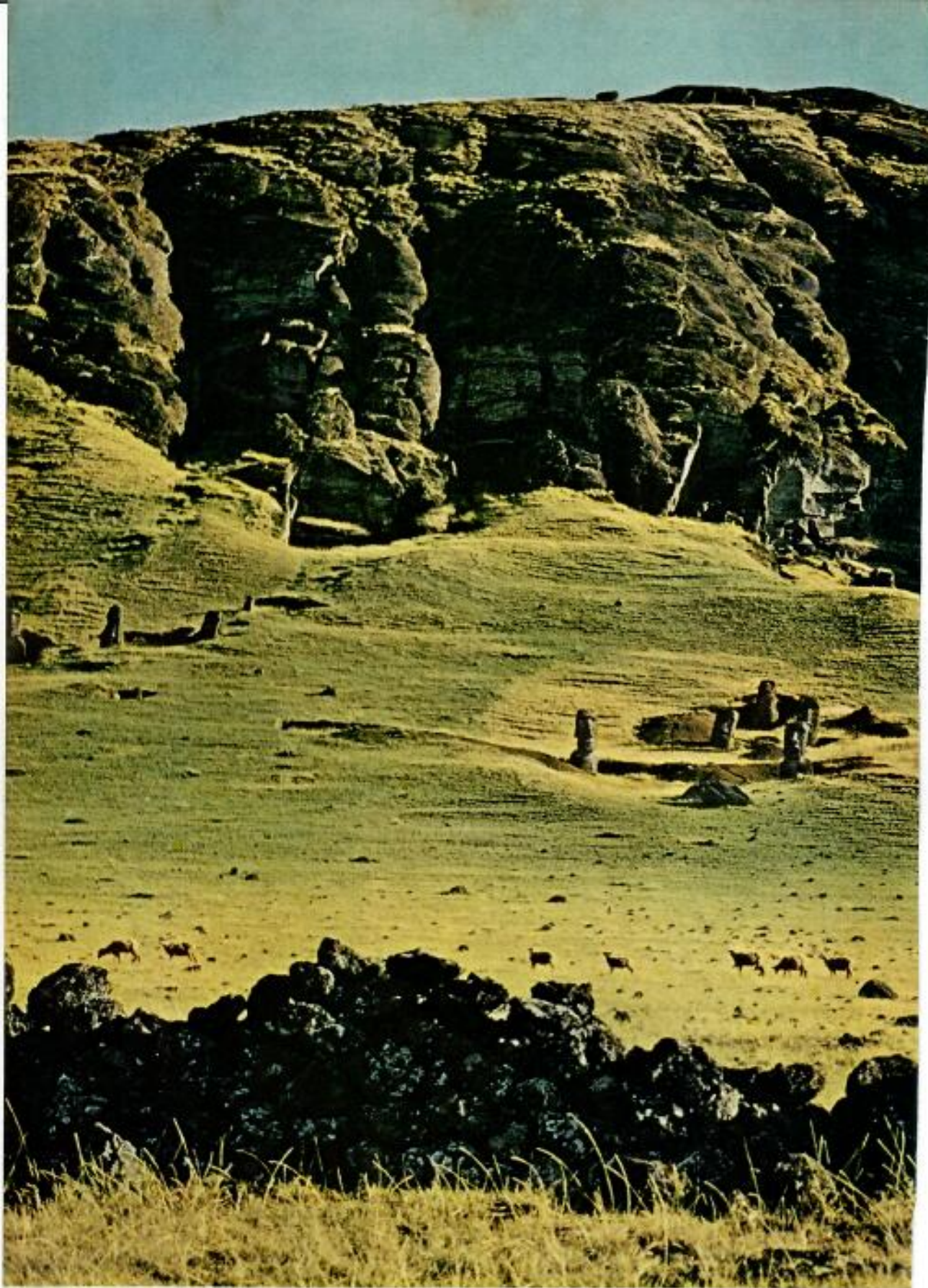
Commodore Jacob Roggeveen christened his discovery in honor of the day and wrote in his log of the "remarkably tall stone figures ... [that] caused us to be filled with wonder."

To many a smiling island of Polynesia, discovery brought not civilization but tragedy. On Easter it reached epic proportions. Roggeveen's own landing party inexplicably opened fire on the bewildered islanders, leaving 12 of them dead and more wounded.

Purse-lipped Goliath Shades an Easter Islander and His Mount

Ancient Polynesian artisans worked porous volcanic tufa with basalt pickaxes and polishing stones that still lie scattered in the quarry. How they hauled the massive monuments remains a mystery. Most of this figure lies submerged, like an iceberg, beneath the shifting soil of three centuries.

KODACHROME BY THOMAS J. ABERCROMBIE © N.S.P.



Passengers aboard the transport *Presidente Pinto* numbered more than a hundred civilians—including a score of islanders returning from training courses in Chile—and some two dozen cows to bolster Easter's beef herds. Almost daily the islanders gathered on deck to entertain all hands with traditional Easter Island songs and dances; the cows provided a doleful Greek chorus of moos.

Nine days and 2,300 miles out of Valparaiso, *Pinto* made its lonely landfall. Mysterious and totally dark, Easter materialized on the predawn horizon like a purple cloud. All of us on deck stared quietly, thoughtfully, at this tiny seat of a venerable culture standing alone and defiant amid a million square miles of empty ocean.

The first sunlight showed us a tranquil, rolling island dotted with ancient volcanoes, their fires long since spent. Clumps of trees nestled like cool oases in the parched turf.

All tranquillity ceased at the water's edge, however; the sea, as though resentful of this intruding island, clawed savagely at its coasts (page 114). For ages smashing surf had eroded the shoreline into a lunar wilderness of naked, jagged lava that kept ships at a wary distance.

We went ashore in landing craft, shooting a narrow, wave-whipped passage between rocks, to tie up at Hanga Roa's concrete wharf. For a weird moment I thought we had arrived in the Old West. From all sides islanders on wiry mustanglike horses galloped toward us, and just beyond the wharf several ponies nibbled grass in a corral.

Edmundo Edwards, a young Chilean, greeted us at the wharf. I asked about the horses. "Well," he answered, "here you either ride one or you walk—and the lava ruins shoes." Easter, I soon learned, actually has more horses than people, and babies start to ride as soon as they can toddle.

Buried Neck-deep, Tottering Stone Images Gaze Into Eternity

Folk history of Easter Island, or Rapa Nui, says the statues represent figures of venerated ancestors. Lacking wood to carve, artists turned to abundant and workable volcanic rock. Many figures wore cylindrical 3- to 13-ton hats of red stone that toppled long ago. Feuds or an epidemic may have halted the work about three hundred years ago.



MOCHROME BY SERGIO LARRAIN, MUSEUM © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Edmundo had arranged for us to lodge with his friend Santiago Pakarati, an island sage steeped in the old traditions. Santiago, an agile man of 63 (page 109), ushered us into an immaculately clean dining room. His daughter Maria brought us a pitcher of pineapple-flavored water.

Thus, painlessly, we encountered one of the harsh realities of life on Easter. The island has little potable fresh water—not a single spring or stream and only a few wells. Rain water supplies most wants, from washing to drinking. Each householder rigs an elaborate system of traps and pipes to channel every raindrop into storage tanks.

Pineapple Juice Flavors Murky Water

I well remember the first time I drank this water straight. Santiago scooped up a bucketful from his tank and poured me a glass—cloudy, slightly rust colored, alive with flotsam—that brought a shudder to my stomach as I downed it. However, the islanders convert a deficiency into a grace by mixing it with the juice of the small, sweet pineapples that grow in Hanga Roa, creating a delicious, refreshing beverage.

Maria questioned us about life on the “island of United States,” and was pleased to learn that we had both visited “the island of France,” a country that fascinated her.

With a worn pocketknife, Santiago carved up a watermelon, a summertime staple on

Easter Island. As we bit into its cool pinkness, he said, “We have your people to thank for these. Years ago an American yacht anchored here, and those aboard gave a watermelon to one of the islanders. He ate it and planted the seeds. Now, every watermelon on Rapa Nui is a descendant of that gift.”

Santiago typified Easter Island's hospitality. He assigned Tom and me a bedroom to ourselves—sparsely furnished but with linen as white as soap and water could scrub it—and dipped deep into his meager larder for our meals. Not until we left did I discover that, to provide this space for us, Santiago himself was sleeping in an attic so cramped that he had to crawl in and out. For his generosity, Santiago would accept only one thing from us—our thanks.

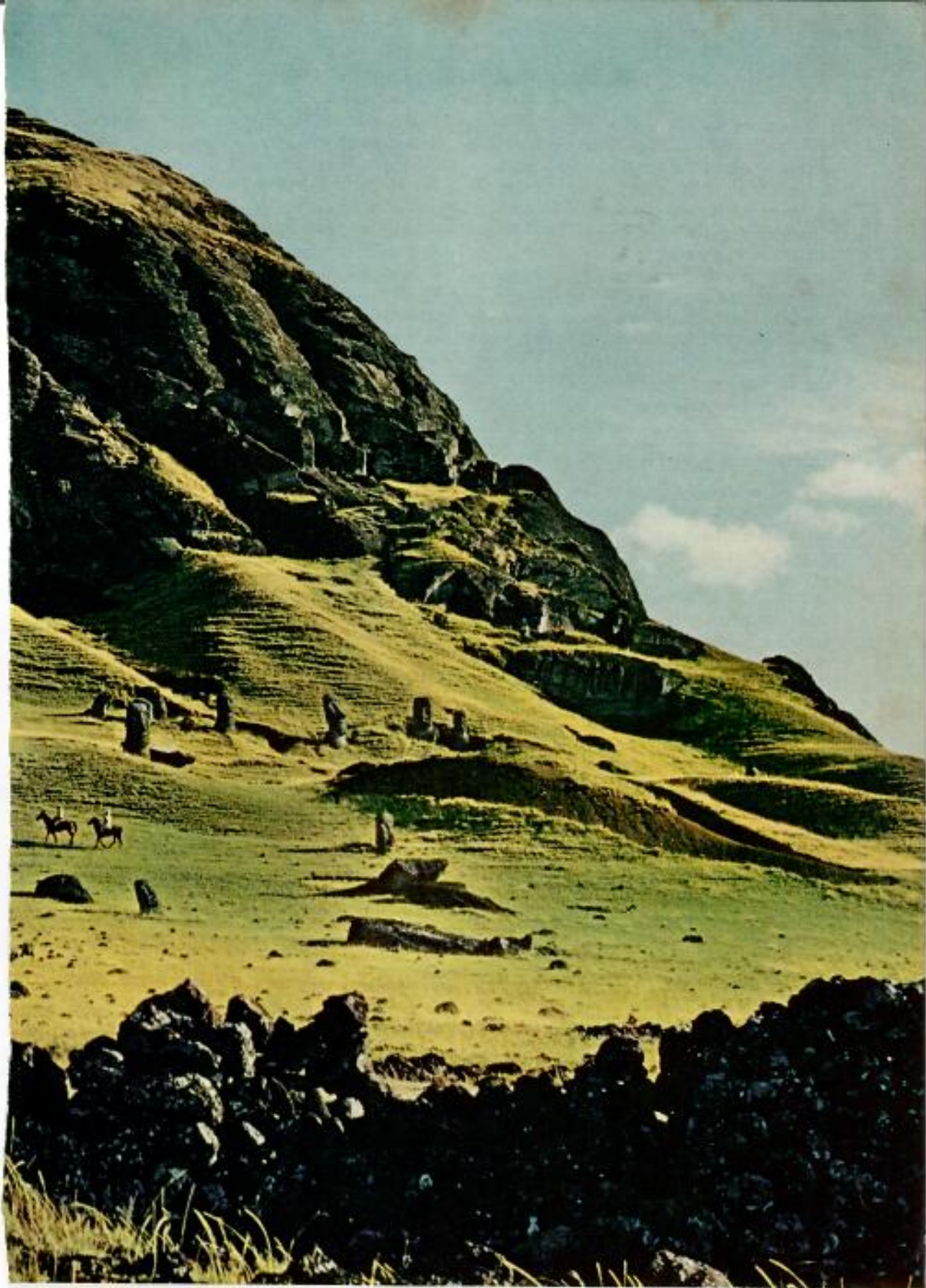
Sheep Sell for Only 25 Cents

While Maria prepared our dinner of chicken and bananas, Tom and I toured the village. We passed a frame hospital, where a navy doctor provides free medical care for the islanders, and a neat wooden schoolhouse, where nuns offer education through the sixth grade for some 250 island children.

Nondescript chickens pecked everywhere, ready meat for those nimble enough to catch them. Easter families, I later learned, may also buy surplus sheep from the government farm for 25 cents each. Fish, which abound offshore, supplement the islanders' supply



AS EASTERHOMES (ABOVE AND OPPOSITE, LOWER) AND KOUALHEMÉ BY THOMAS J. REEBOROUGH, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF © N. G. S.



KODACHROME BY THOMAS J. ABERCROMBIE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF © N.G.S.

chipped 90-ton monuments from solid rock and hauled them as far as 10 miles to shrines across

the island. Later statues, abandoned near the mountain, were gradually buried to the neck.



RODACHENORRE © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



Key to mystic symbols died with Easter Islanders of the last century, but scholars are slowly cracking the script. *Rongorongo* boards served pagan priests reciting religious chants. Scribes carved figures on wood with obsidian knives or shark teeth. They used a unique hieroglyphic system, the only known native writing in Polynesia.

For reading, this board should be turned on its side and the characters followed from left to right. Every other line stands upside down, requiring the reader to twist the board around.

The message of this example, now in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., remains in dispute. True size of the script appears at left.

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of protein. Pineapples, melons, corn, and bananas help round out their diet.

However, life on Rapa Nui has its problems: for example, unemployment. Only 40 men work steadily on the farm. The remainder till their plots of land and carve traditional images of wood. These they barter to visitors for clothes and cigarettes.

I ended my first day on the island with a visit to Father Sebastian Englert. One of a distinguished line of missionaries that began with Brother Eugène Eyraud, who brought Christianity to the island in 1864, Father Sebastian has ministered to the islanders for 26 years. A scientist and linguist, he has written books on Easter's ethnology and archeology, as well as a dictionary of the language.

GEOGRAPHICS Arrive, 12 at a Time

I found Father Sebastian in his study, engulfed in the full year's mail that had arrived on the *Pinto*. Scattered across his desk, I saw the familiar yellow covers of 12 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICS, the issues for all 1960. Father Sebastian proved to be a fellow member—and an ardent one. Bearded, tonsured, clad in the white robes of a Capuchin, he reminded me of an Old Testament prophet—but a gentle, joyous prophet (page 104).

Collecting NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICS has taxed many a member's storage space, and Father Sebastian was no exception. His copies extended back 35 years. When the *Pinto* dropped anchor, he was engrossed in rereading "Through the Great River Trenches of Asia," by Joseph F. Rock, in the August, 1926, issue. Now, however, he had focused all his attention upon his mountain of mail.

Father Sebastian's knowledge of Rapa Nui's fast disappearing traditions is unrivaled.

"A kernel of truth hides in every legend," he told me. "I have no doubt that Hotu Matu'a is a historical figure and very likely came from the Marquesas Islands. Tradition says his home was an island called Hiva. In the Marquesas this name occurs several times—Hiva Oa and Nuku Hiva, for example.

"Some cataclysm apparently drove Hotu Matu'a to sail to Easter. However, there is a strong probability that his group was not the first to settle here."

Father Sebastian's church is the social as well as the religious center of Hanga Roa, and Sunday Mass climaxes the week. I joined the starched and brushed islanders as they gathered for a gregarious stroll before Mass.

When the bell tolled, we filed inside the sparsely decorated building where men sit on

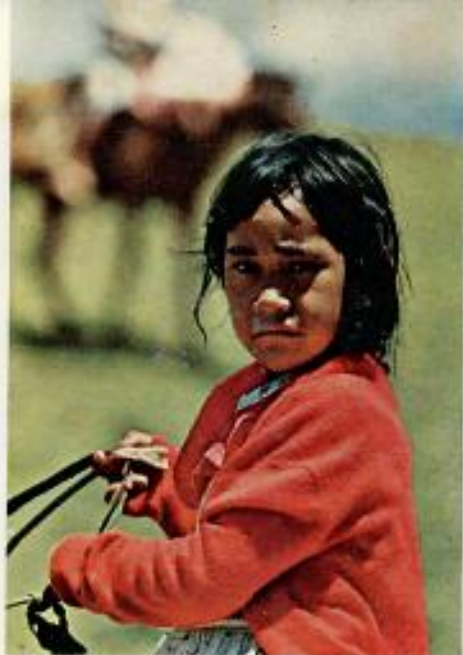


Today's pet, tomorrow's dinner. Chickens give the islanders a major source of protein. The little boy is half Polynesian, half Chilean.



Twelve-year-old descendant of the old stonemasons stands at the village church. Behind the cross lies Brother Eugène Eyraud, the island's first missionary. He converted the people before he died in 1868.

Polynesian beauty, Maria Pakarati offers a bouquet of geraniums. Her father, Santiago, was host to the author and photographer during their two-week stay on the island.

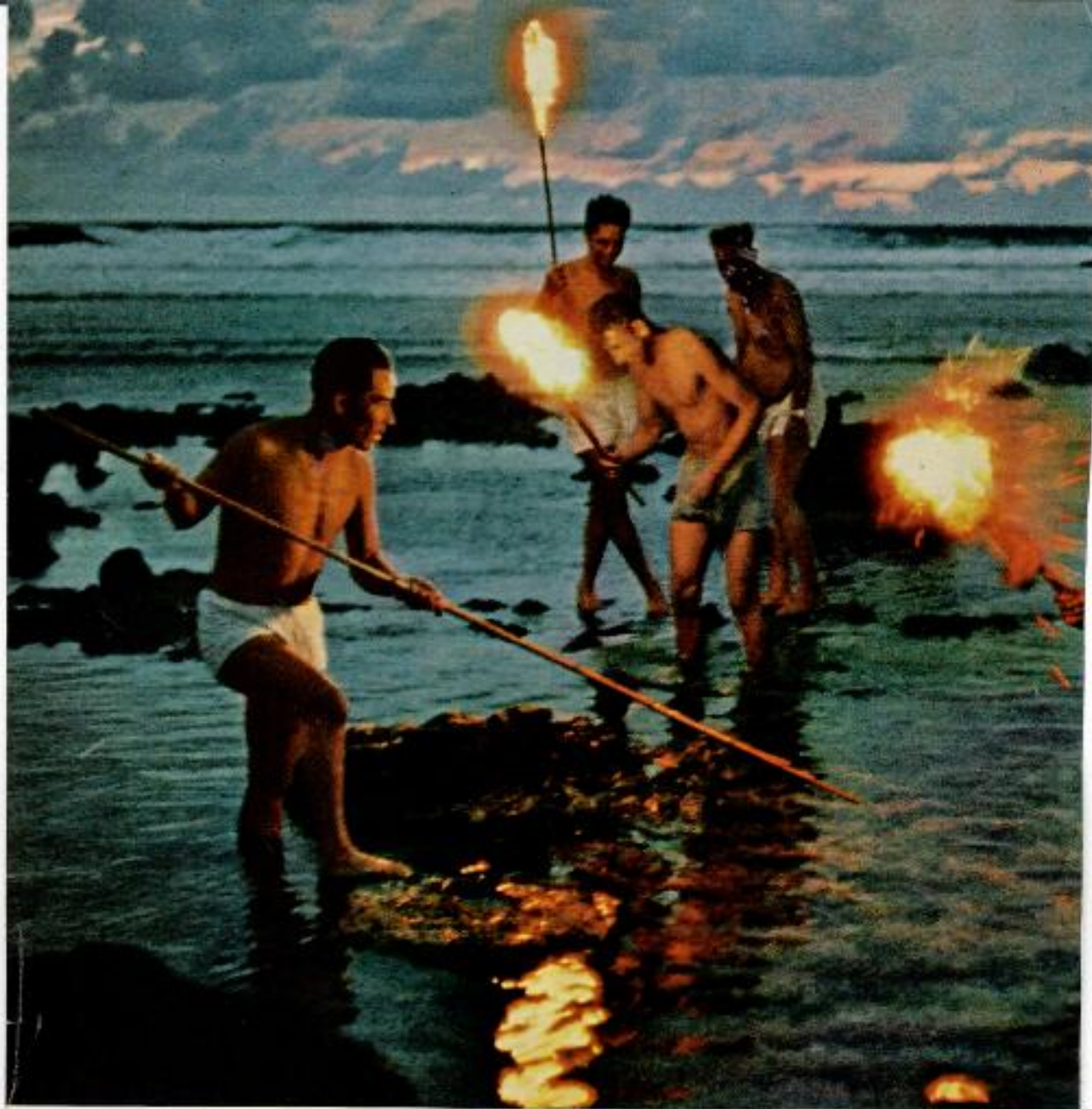


PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERGIO LARRAIN

Five-year-old rider handles her reins smartly on her way to church in Hanga Roa.

Faces of Rapa Nui





we learned, would be one pack of cigarettes per horse per day.

Actually, the economy of Easter Island turns on cigarettes, not cash. By Chilean law, the \$80,000-a-year proceeds of the sheep farm revert to the needs of the island, providing precious lumber, nails, cement, and machinery. Little remains for luxuries such as tobacco. As a result, cigarettes, generally obtained in barter from visiting ships, have become Rapa Nui's unofficial currency.

One Sunday morning I noticed a Chilean bank note lying on the grassy plaza before the church. Waiting for Mass to begin, the islanders strolled about the plaza, indifferently eying the money.

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"Why doesn't anyone pick up that bill?" I asked Santiago.

"What for?" he shrugged. "It will buy nothing here."

The perennial cigarette shortage has also fathered a vigorous cottage industry. Tobacco plants—their pale-pink blooms nodding on awkward six-foot stems—grace virtually every kitchen garden. Santiago's tobacco patch stood behind his house, jealously protected by a high wall of lava blocks.

"Let me tell you, *hombre*, you can get used to anything," Santiago once told me mournfully as he reached for a leaf. "Here you cure the tobacco by charring it with a match. Then you roll it in a scrap of paper and smoke it."

the left, women on the right (page 107).

Hanga Roa, I was to find throughout my stay, is far from Paris, and the women's dresses are plain, almost dowdy. But Polynesian magic—a snippet of golden ribbon, the flash of smoldering eyes, a red flower in the hair—lends an exotic charm.

Old traditions still color the islanders' Christianity, and many spend considerable effort propitiating the restless spirits, or *aku-aku*, that haunt the lava landscape.

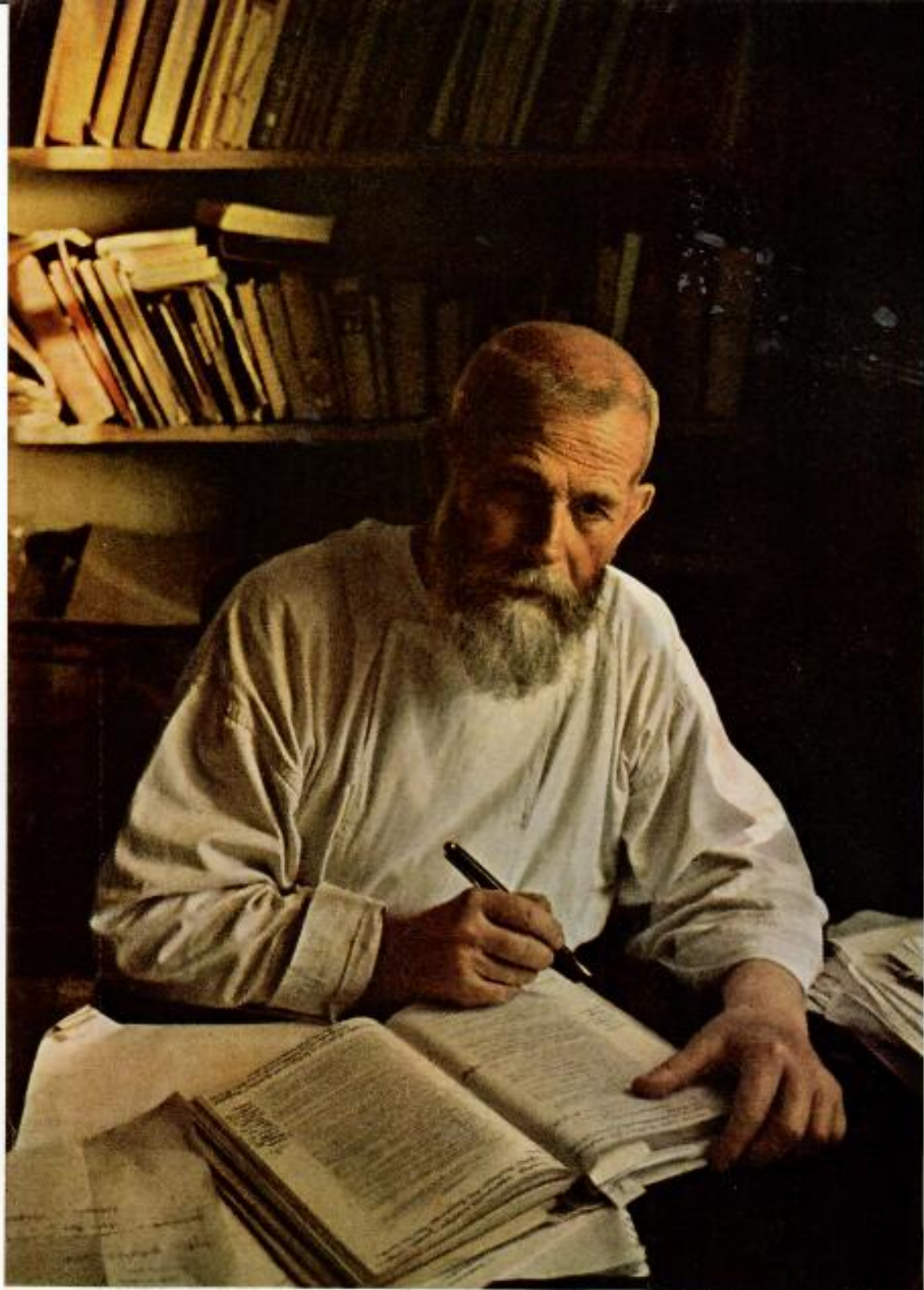
A single cock crowing off schedule—a certain sign that such a spirit roams abroad—can terrorize everyone within earshot. Dreams foreshadow the future. For example, a woman who dreams of a rat, an ox, or the color white knows she will bear a son; a crab or the color red foretells a daughter. An islander hesitates to awaken another—he might be having an important dream.

As the first step in our exploration of the Navel of the World, Tom and I rented horses. The price,

Cat's cradle, here an adult pastime, forms symbolic designs that tell island myths. Stringed figures help Amelia de Pakarati to narrate the story of Hotu Matu'a, Easter's legendary first king, and his long canoe voyage in search of a new land for his people. Often Amelia chants as she weaves. Her husband (above), the author's host, stares through one of her designs.

SERGIO LARAIN

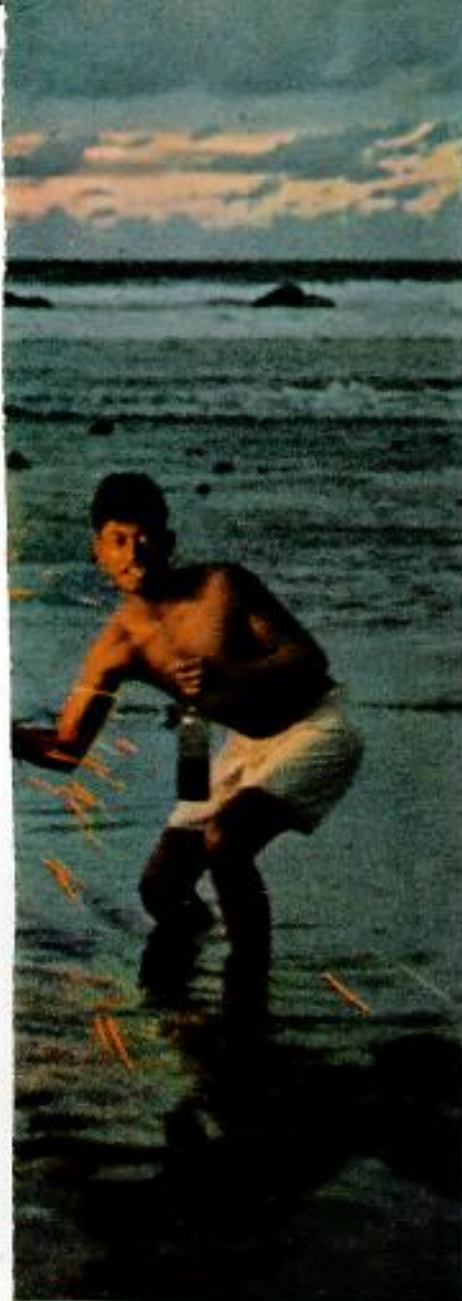




HS EXCHROME © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Bearded Scholar in His Secluded Library Probes Easter's Mysteries

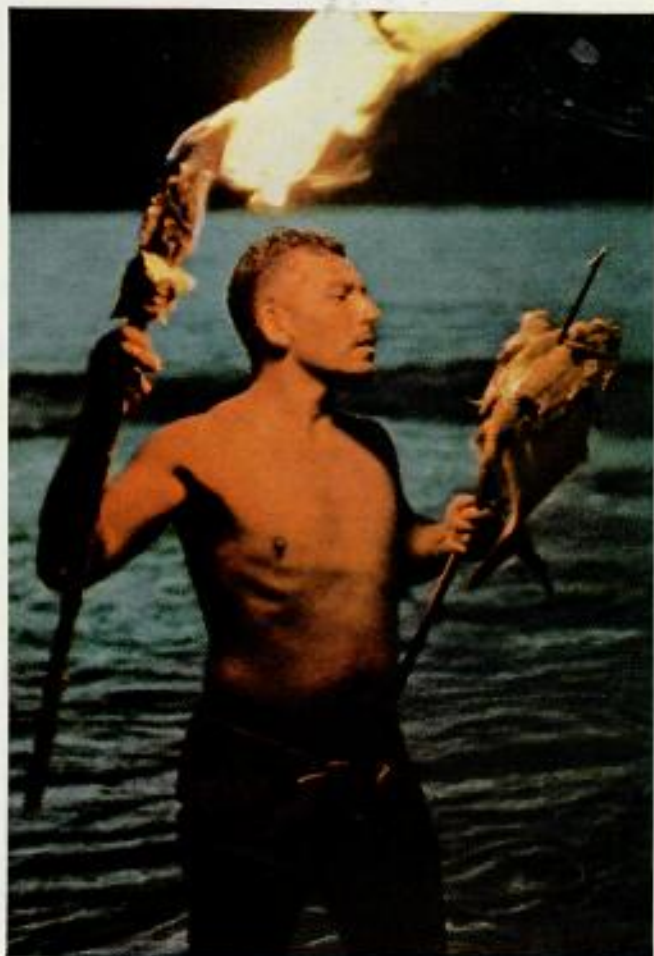
A Capuchin missionary, Father Sebastian Englert has preached on the island since 1935. His book, *The Land of Hotu Matu'a*, contains chapters on Easter's history and culture as well as a grammar of the local Polynesian dialect. The padre is a member of the Society. "I receive my NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICS 12 at a time on the yearly supply ship," he told the author, "and I read every article."



Kerosene Torches Lure Fish Within Range of Spears

Easter's waters abound in tuna, bonito, and a sea crayfish as tasty as the Maine lobster. These men bounded barefoot across jagged rocks that lacerated the author's tennis shoes. Sparks fly as the boy at right charges his torch from a bottle.

Squirrelfish and jacks weight the spear of Regino Calderon, who wades ashore on the beach at Anakena Cove.



HE STACKHOLM BY THOMAS J. ADERSON, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF © N.G.S.

His face contorted. "Aiyee! What a taste!"

The craze for cigarettes has even had a small international repercussion. A Russian oceanographic ship recently stopped at Easter, and the islanders duly climbed aboard laden with wood carvings.

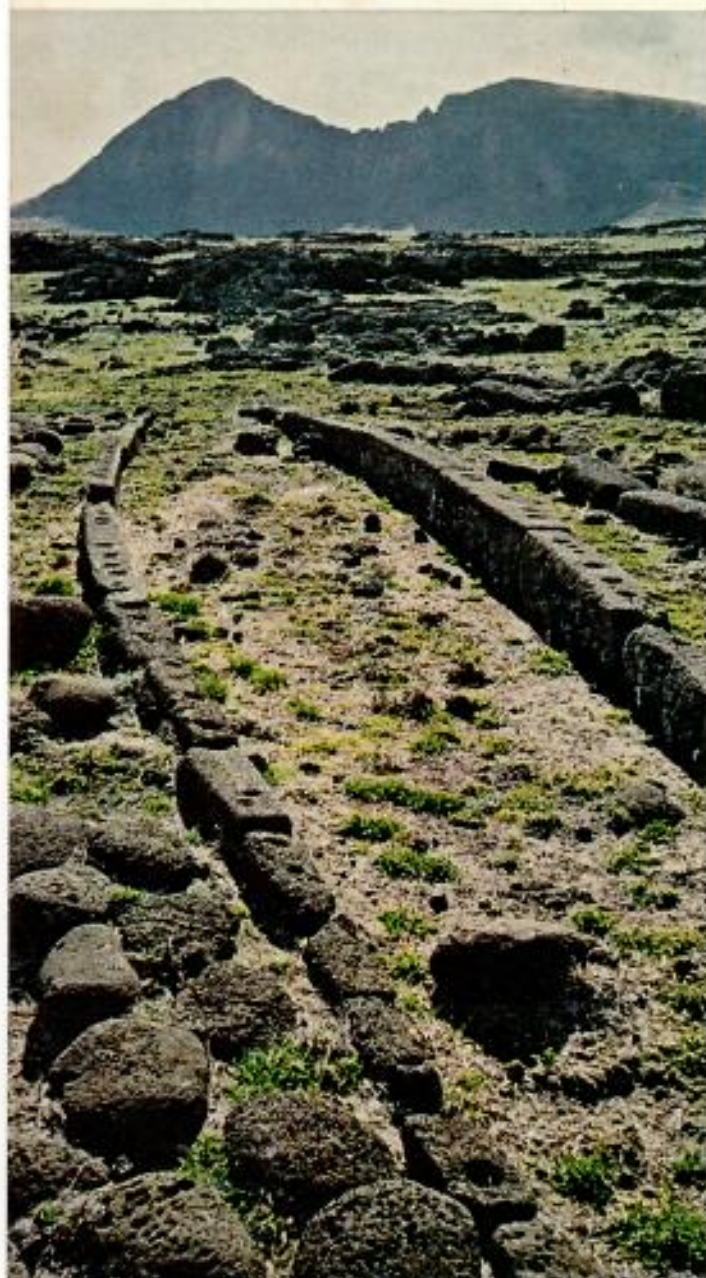
The Russians proved amiable traders, and the elated islanders returned with an apparent fortune in smokes. However, the cartons contained only *papirosy*, singular Russian cigarettes with three-inch mouthpieces tipped by a mere inch of tobacco. The outraged islanders promptly took sides in the cold war—against the Soviet Union.

With our cigarette-rented mounts, we set out from Hanga Roa in the dewy cool of the

morning on a long tour through antiquity and vanished grandeur. Our guide was Mateo Veriveri, a sinewy sexagenarian who traced his lineage to Hotu Matu'a. Easter Island venerates age, and Mateo was Santiago's chief rival for the honored title of the island's oldest sage.

Giants in Stone Stand Eternal Guard

A brassy sun mounted the sky as we jogged out of Hanga Roa and wound across the rolling, treeless countryside. A day's trip brought us to the goal of all who visit Easter Island—the slopes of Rano Raraku. This great volcano, green and rounded now with age, molders quietly near the island's eastern tip.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SERGIO LARRAIN

Only stone foundations remain of an old-time dwelling near Hotuiti Anchorage. When in use, the house resembled an inverted longboat. Builders fitted wooden poles into the holes, lashed them together in the form of an arch, and covered them with thatch.

Trees Imported From Tahiti Shade a Modern Home on an Island Once Almost Barren of Trees

Here, in the quiet village of Hanga Roa, lives Easter's entire population, some 1,100 people. Corrugated-iron roofs catch rain, for water is scarce. Grass-carpeted street in foreground provides a playground for the boy and his dog. Easter's five Jeeps present no traffic problem.

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they lived in houses made of stone, while their agents took up posts upon the islet of Motu Nui just off the coast.

The man who found the first egg of the sooty terns that nested each year on Motu Nui would swim back through the shark-infested waters to the foot of the volcano, climb its sheer face, and present the treasured egg to his leader. A priest would thereupon declare the lucky chief *tangata manu*, or bird-man, for the coming year.

We saw nothing of the curious cult but the silent stone huts and a jumbled mass of rocks covered with petroglyphs (page 112). Outlined in basalt, stylized *tangata manu*, bird-masked humans holding eggs in attitudes of reverence, made their offerings beneath an empty sky. Fittingly enough, the only sound to break the stillness was the fretful squawking of birds as they wheeled above the vast abyss of Rano Kao's crater.

My wearying horse traced a long loop past Punapau, another extinct volcano



Almost every moai on Easter was quarried from the volcanic tufa on this mountain; the largest examples still dot its slopes.

No matter how many pictures you have seen of the sneering statues, no matter how many accounts you have read of their origin, the first sight of them bursts upon you in strange and somber glory (page 96).

As our horses angled up Rano Raraku's southwest slope, the huge figures, many of them buried to the shoulders, hunched like an army of vanquished colossi. Yet their grim lips and beetling brows admitted no defeat—not by time, not by the elements, not by the death of the culture that produced them. They glowered across the island, past the seething surf, across the endless azure of the Pacific, seemingly across time itself.

Shrines Honor Islanders' Forebears

Dismounting, Mateo and I climbed to the volcano's rim. There, just below the crest, unfinished statues repose like bulky sarcophagi in hollowed crypts.

Using stone picks, the early islanders had laboriously chipped each figure out of the side of the mountain. We clambered past statues in all stages of completion—from the first tentative profiles scratched on a rock wall to those in the final phase when only a thin strip of stone bound them to their matrices. Centuries ago, a few strokes of a hand ax would have freed them; now they sleep prisoners of the rock forever.

Why did the people of Hotu Matu'a carve these mighty sentinels? Legends agree that each represented the figure of an ancestor.

After quarrying a statue from the stone of Rano Raraku, the islanders hauled it to one of more than 240 shrines, or *ahu*, that line the island's coasts. Each *ahu* honored the forebears of a given group of relatives. But intergroup rivalry apparently led to ever larger statues. In the end, the sculptors simply raised them on the slopes; some were abandoned en route to the shrines.

An eeriness pervaded the entire scene. Everything about Rano Raraku—the partially completed statues, the stone tools abandoned beside them, the finished giants deployed upon the slope—spoke of catastrophe. I had the impression that once, long ago, legions of craftsmen laid down their tools at the end of a day and simply never returned.

The key to the twin riddles of Rano Raraku—why did the islanders carve the out-

sized images? why did they abruptly stop?—lies buried somewhere among those frowning giants. Archeologists are convinced that systematic excavation will eventually bring it to light.

From Rano Raraku we rode along the southern coast, where titanic waves that had rampaged up 3,000 miles of open ocean from Antarctica exploded like artillery salvos against Easter's crumbling shoreline. Towering and gray, they seemed to drown the very sky.

Mateo led me to a rock before an immense cave called Hanga tuu Hata that overlooked the sea. On it a bedazzled observer had carved his impression of a strange ship that visited his island.

With my finger I could still trace the weathered outline. Was it, as Mateo said, Roggeveen's *De Afrikaansche Galei*, sails taut and pennants whipping before a wind that had died 239 years before?

At Vinapu we paused before the imposing ruins of one of Easter's oldest coastal shrines. Long-forgotten masons had fitted together the great stones of the shrine's base so perfectly that Tom Abercrombie could not insert the blade of his penknife at any joint. On the site's landward side, broken statues littered the earth, the remains of some long-past *Götterdämmerung*.

With the fall of evening, we sat before our tent watching the savage beauty of sunsets that slashed the heavens with writhing flame. There in the dusk, Mateo rejoiced in his role of island patriarch.

This lineal descendant of Hotu Matu'a enchanted us with legends of the feuds that had raged across the island in the waning days of his ancestors' glory. And when Mateo finally turned in for the night, he slept on his elbows and knees in a crouching position—a throwback, he explained the next morning, to the days of those same civil wars when men slept thus in order to fly or fight at the first alarm.

Rivals Vie to Collect Eggs

Circling around and up the gradual slope of Rano Kao, Easter's mightiest extinct volcano, we came to the deserted village of Orongo crouched on its seaward crest. Here, until the late 19th century, the islanders had practiced a bizarre religious rite centered upon the eggs of the sooty tern.

In July of each year chiefs of the dominant tribes led a procession up to Orongo. There

that had furnished topknots of red tufa for some of the statues lining the coast. North of Hanga Roa, amid trees and vines and vivid flowers, I stopped at Easter's saddest monument—a leprosarium.

Leprosy, the scourge of Polynesia, came to Rapa Nui from Tahiti in the last century and decimated the population. New drugs can now arrest the disease, and many of Easter's

lepers live at home; 13 contagious cases, however, remain in isolation at the leprosarium, with two nuns to care for them. I accompanied one of the sisters to the new, airy medical pavilion for afternoon treatments. Mercifully, leprosy is its own anesthetic, and the patients felt no pain as she dressed their lesions with infinite gentleness.

Back in Hanga Roa, we found Santiago Pakarati arranging to roast a pig for a last feast before the *Pinto's* departure. For one entire day Santiago prepared an *umu*, or traditional Polynesian earth oven. Carefully he selected the stones he would heat and the broad, green banana leaves he would use to enfold the pig. Occasionally his eye drifted hungrily to the luckless entree, securely tied to a near-by tree; for its part, the pig just oinked disconsolately.

Early next morning, with the guests alerted and all the Pakarati women cooking tidbits, Santiago went to get the pig. But during the night someone had taken it. With a sigh of resignation, he canceled the dinner and went fishing. No one seemed upset.

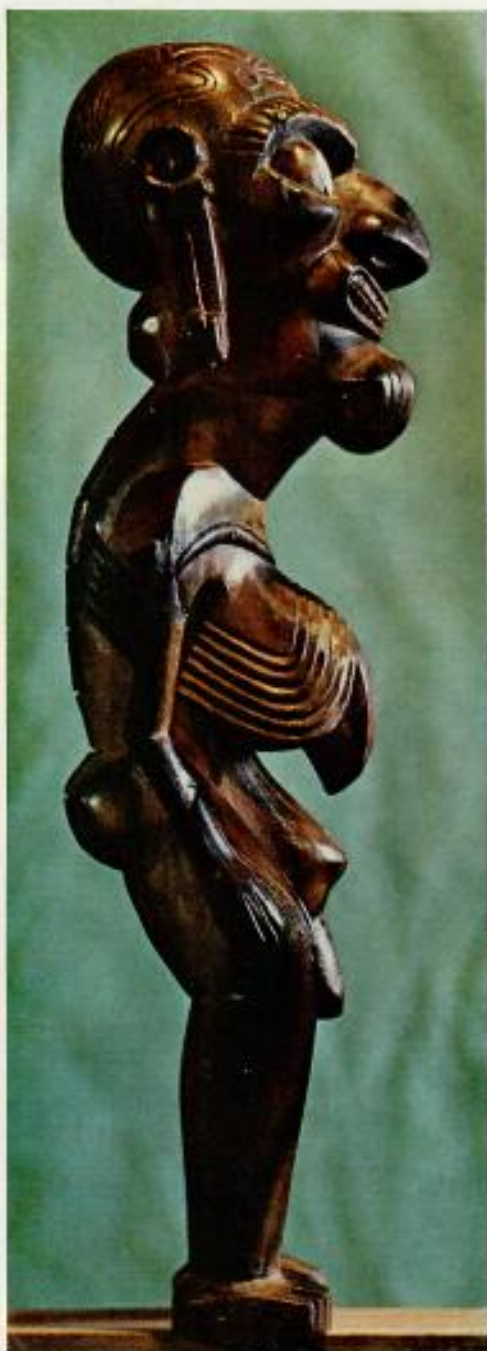
During our stay someone casually made off with our horses and someone else just as casually found us two more. Again, no one seemed surprised or upset.

Scientists Reconstruct Old Shrine

Dr. William Mulloy, a University of Wyoming anthropologist who has spent almost two years on Easter, and Chilean archeologist Gonzalo Figueroa worked for eight months in 1960 reconstructing the shrine Ahu Akivi, three miles north of the village (page 90).

"Our biggest problem," he explained, "was learning the precise details of how the ancients raised the stone images. In the end, we levered up a statue, then placed stones beneath it, levered it further, added more stones, and repeated the process until it stood upright.

"This is almost certainly the method used in ancient times. Before just about every ahu



XOSACHRORE © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Evil spirit, a *moai kavakava* glares balefully. Small images appear to have been as important to the island's religious art as the large statues. Today's carvers make them only for the curio trade. Photographer Abercrombie bought this wooden reproduction for two shirts.



83 EXTACHROMES BY THOMAS J. ARBACROMBIE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF © N.G.S.

Church Services Bring Islanders Out in Their Sunday Best

Father Sebastian's congregation hears him conduct Mass in Latin and preach in Spanish and the native tongue. Members sing Christian hymns set to Tahitian chants. Women sit on one side of the aisle, men on the other. Nuns staff the island's only school.

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on the island we've found stones scattered in great numbers. Since they're not natural to the sites, we assume that they served to raise the statues."

Dr. Mulloy's work, combined with the findings of the Thor Heyerdahl expedition of 1955-56, now presents a clear, though incomplete, picture of Easter Island's history. Near a ditch on the Poike headland, the Norwegian group unearthed signs of human presence that date, according to carbon-14 tests, from the fourth century A.D.

These early inhabitants built large open-air altars of excellent masonry. But sometime around A.D. 1100 many of the shrines fell into ruin and give evidence of total abandonment. Reconstruction followed, and during this period the first giant statues appeared. Nearby houses of the priesthood date from this

era; long and boat-shaped, they bear some resemblance to early Marquesan dwellings.

Who were the rebuilders? No one knows.

On Rano Raraku craftsmen continued to carve obsessively, their statues growing ever larger, ever more stylized until some unknown catastrophe—perhaps a massacre—struck some 300 years ago.

The 17th century ushered in vicious inter-clan warfare, with the victors destroying the shrines of the defeated. Tradition tells us that, throughout this turbulent era, most islanders lived in caves, venturing out only at night in search of food. Cannibalism was rampant, and in any conflict the victors invariably ate the vanquished.

In addition to the stone images, Easter Island has produced the only form of writing yet discovered in Oceania. Meticulously en-

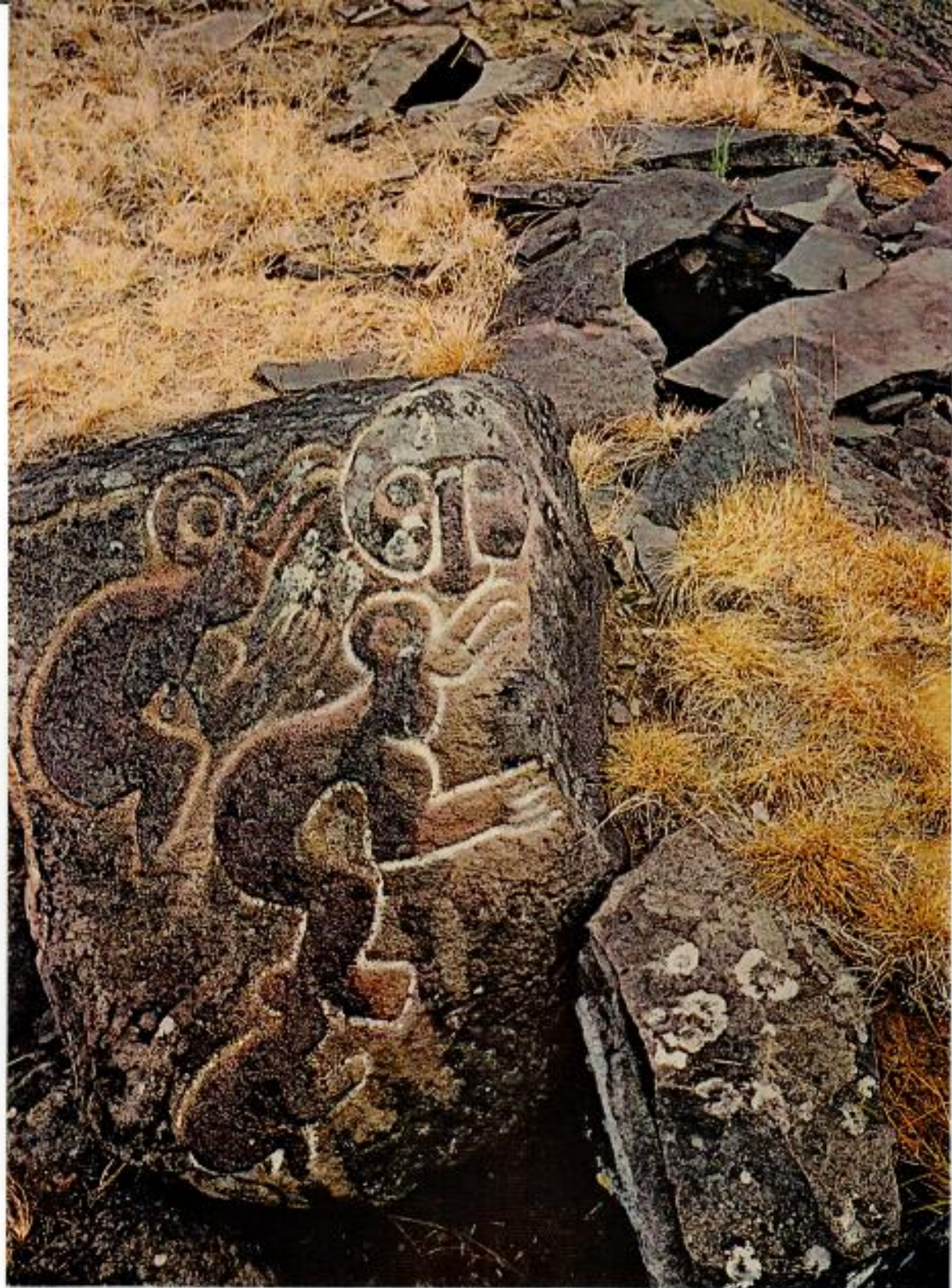




115 EXTACHROME © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Wood Carver Shapes a Demon's Eyebrows on a Walking Stick Bearing Two Heads

All year long, artisans devote their spare time to fashioning souvenirs for sale to visitors. They reach a crescendo of activity just before the once-a-year ship arrives from Chile. In exchange for their wares, they accept shoes, shirts, and cigarettes. Often offered as antiques, many statuettes are copied from pictures; others are products of lusty imaginations. Santiago Pakarati, the author's host, works with a ground-down table knife. He sets obsidian pupils in the fish-bone eyes of imp and bird.



KOONCHONG © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Dancing Petroglyphs Preserve the Rituals of a Vanished Bird-man Cult

Until the mid-1800's the bird-man feast highlighted the religious year. Cultists moved into stone huts on Rano Kao crater, where they overlooked the isle of Motu Nui, nesting place of migratory sooty terns. For weeks celebrants chanted and danced. When the sacred birds settled on their nests, strong men swam the channel in competition for the season's first egg. The winner's patron became a ceremonial chief for a year, with a license to exact tribute. Hole behind the carvings leads through the roof of a stone hut.

graved pictographs on wooden tablets, called *kohau rongo-rongo* (page 100), once served the priestly class as "talking boards."

A German cryptanalyst, Dr. Thomas S. Barthel, attacked the script in 1953 and has gone far toward cracking its secrets. Virtually every delicately carved symbol, he says, represents a word. Thus a stylized human figure means "man"; a blossom means "flower" or "woman," both pronounced *pua* in the Rapa Nui language.

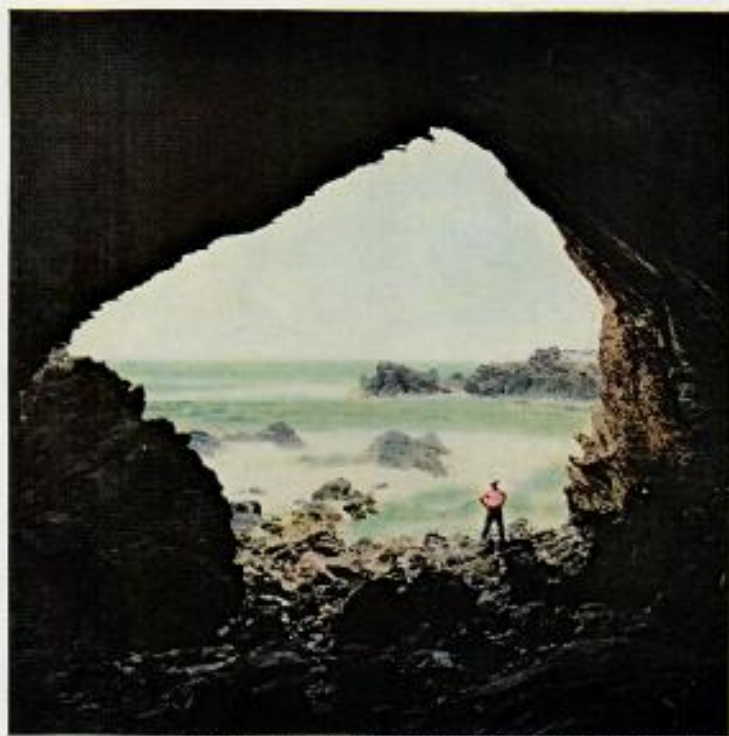
Tablets Refer to Polynesian Islands

The tablets have proved to be religious rather than historical texts, but in Barthel's opinion they link Easter inextricably with the rest of Polynesia. He has found references to the islands we know as Tahiti, Bora Bora, and Pitcairn, as well as to common Polyne-

sian plants that never grew on Rapa Nui. He concludes that the *rongo-rongo* script originated elsewhere in Polynesia and came to Easter in the canoes of Hotu Matu'a.

Some archeologists see the prehistoric Easter Island culture as a mixture of Polynesian and Peruvian ideas. They cite: (1) the resemblance between the masonry at some shrines and a type of fine dressed-stone work found in Peru; (2) the presence in Easter Island's volcanic lakes of *totoro* reeds, unknown elsewhere in Polynesia but common along the west coast of South America; (3) the Peruvian custom of wearing earplugs, also found on Easter Island; (4) interest in solar phenomena, common to both Rapa Nui and Peru; (5) the gigantic statues of both areas, which have many similarities.

Others, however, detect little South Ameri-



KODACHROMES BY THOMAS J. ABERCROMBIE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF © S.S.S.

Pounding seas guard the entrance to Ana Kai Tangata, Cave of the Cannibals, not far from Hanga Roa. Feuding warriors devoured unlucky captives in the grotto. Until acceptance of Christianity a century ago, men feasted ceremonially on human flesh. Usually they excluded women and children from the rites.

Figures of birds fly across Eat-man Cave's peeling walls. Old-time artists painted with volcanic dust mixed with shark oil.

"Evidently ashamed of their ancestors' eating habits, islanders were reluctant to show us the paintings," photographer Abercrombie recalls, "and my guide refused to enter the cave."



**Mountainous Swells Explode Into Foam
Against Jagged Volcanic Cliffs**

Centuries ago Easter's first settlers braved heavy seas on a weeks-long canoe voyage. Today's population still leads an isolated life 2,300 miles from

can influence, or none at all. While some masonry may resemble that of Peru, the form of the shrine itself does not find an exact counterpart there.

Similarities might be due to Polynesian voyages to the continent, though the evidence for this is scanty. In any case, such contacts could not have been extensive, since no ceramics or textiles—the two most characteristic and plentiful products of Peruvian culture—have yet appeared on Easter.

"Long Ears" Fought the "Short Ears"

"Rapa Nui legends," Father Sebastian told me, "recount the presence of two factions on the island—Long Ears and Short Ears. In a climactic battle between the two, the Short Ears trapped their enemies in a ditch that cuts across Poike headland, and burned nearly all of them to death. According to my reckoning from genealogies, this took place in 1680.

"When Dr. Carlyle S. Smith, an American member of the Heyerdahl expedition, excavated the Long Ears Ditch, he found thick layers of charcoal. He told me that an intense fire had raged there and carbon-14 tests placed the date at about 1680—a striking confirmation of the legendary end of the Long Ears."

Some authorities believe the Long Ears—so named for the plugs worn in their ear lobes—came originally from Peru, whereas the Short Ears were later settlers from Polynesia.

However, visitors in the following century recorded the presence of long-eared islanders who apparently differed in no way from their fellow Polynesians. Also, an Easter Island vogue of elongating the ears persisted well into the 19th century.

Cook Saw Link to Western Isles

Some of the earliest voyagers give conflicting accounts of the islanders' racial characteristics. But the observant Captain Cook, who in 1774 touched at Rapa Nui briefly during a famous voyage, wrote: "In colour, features and language, they bear such affinity to the people of the more western islands, that no one will doubt that they have had the same origin."

The island's earliest living sites need more study, and carbon-14 tests must link their dates to those of other areas, before scientists can pass final judgment on the origins of Easter's culture. Most are prepared to admit the possibility of some South American influence, but only systematic investigation

will show to what extent, if any, it existed.

Today's islanders, their blood diluted by successive waves of voyagers, feel a strange nostalgia for the Polynesian heartland. Periodically, in the dead of night, a small boat will break through the surf with a young, furtive crew. Their destination: Tahiti.

Since 1948, eight homemade boats, averaging less than 20 feet in length, have attempted the perilous 2,500-mile voyage. Three arrived safely. The other five, with 31 aboard, disappeared somewhere in the far, fierce wastes of the Pacific.

The first such voyage occurred by accident. On Christmas Day, 1948, Leonardo Pakarati was fishing off Rapa Nui in a small boat with three other men and his two sons aged 9 and 10. When the wind died, they drifted out of sight of the island. After almost two weeks of trying to make their way back, they admitted they were lost.

Leonardo, a classically handsome Polynesian whose hair is now shot with gray, told me: "We had only two pounds of meat, 28 pancakes rolled with sugar, and a small can of water. So we tried to ration ourselves. But by December 31 we had nothing left.

Set Course by Venus at Night

"We realized finally that we could never find the island. Our best chance was to steer for Tahiti, to the northwest." Their navigating, in the end, echoed the methods used by their ancestors a thousand years before, when they coursed the Pacific in frail canoes.

"At evening," Leonardo went on, "we steered just to the north of where the sun set. Then we would aim our prow at the star *te Ura Ahi-ahi*, which you call Venus. In the morning one of us would drop a piece of paper at the bow and we would count off the seconds—we didn't have a watch—until it drifted past the stern, in order to estimate our speed. By day, we steered by the angle of the waves as they hit the boat. Since the current there is always to the west, we tried to keep the breaking waves at an angle to our starboard side.

"We fished constantly, but caught nothing. Day after day, all day, the children cried for water. We could only douse them and ourselves with sea water. One rainfall helped, but not much.

"After a month we were all too weak to do anything but lie in the bottom of the boat between turns at the tiller.

"Then, on the 34th day, we saw sea birds, and I knew we were nearing land. Three days



after that, we beached on a tiny island near Tahiti."

The voyagers like Leonardo, who do manage to reach Tahiti, find their Polynesian paradise short-lived. The realities of national sovereignty have swallowed up the old freebooting days of inter-island migrations. The Polynesians of Easter are now Chilean; their cousins of Tahiti are French. Passports and visas, not open canoes, are the modern currency of travel. In time, the venture-some voyagers are deported to their home island.

One villager told me of the tragicomic case of Felipe Teao, who reached Tahiti in 1954 after a 29-day voyage. There he worked for a Chinese firm, learning Cantonese as well as French. But, after five years on Tahiti, Felipe too was duly deported. Now, he is Easter's only speaker of Chinese.

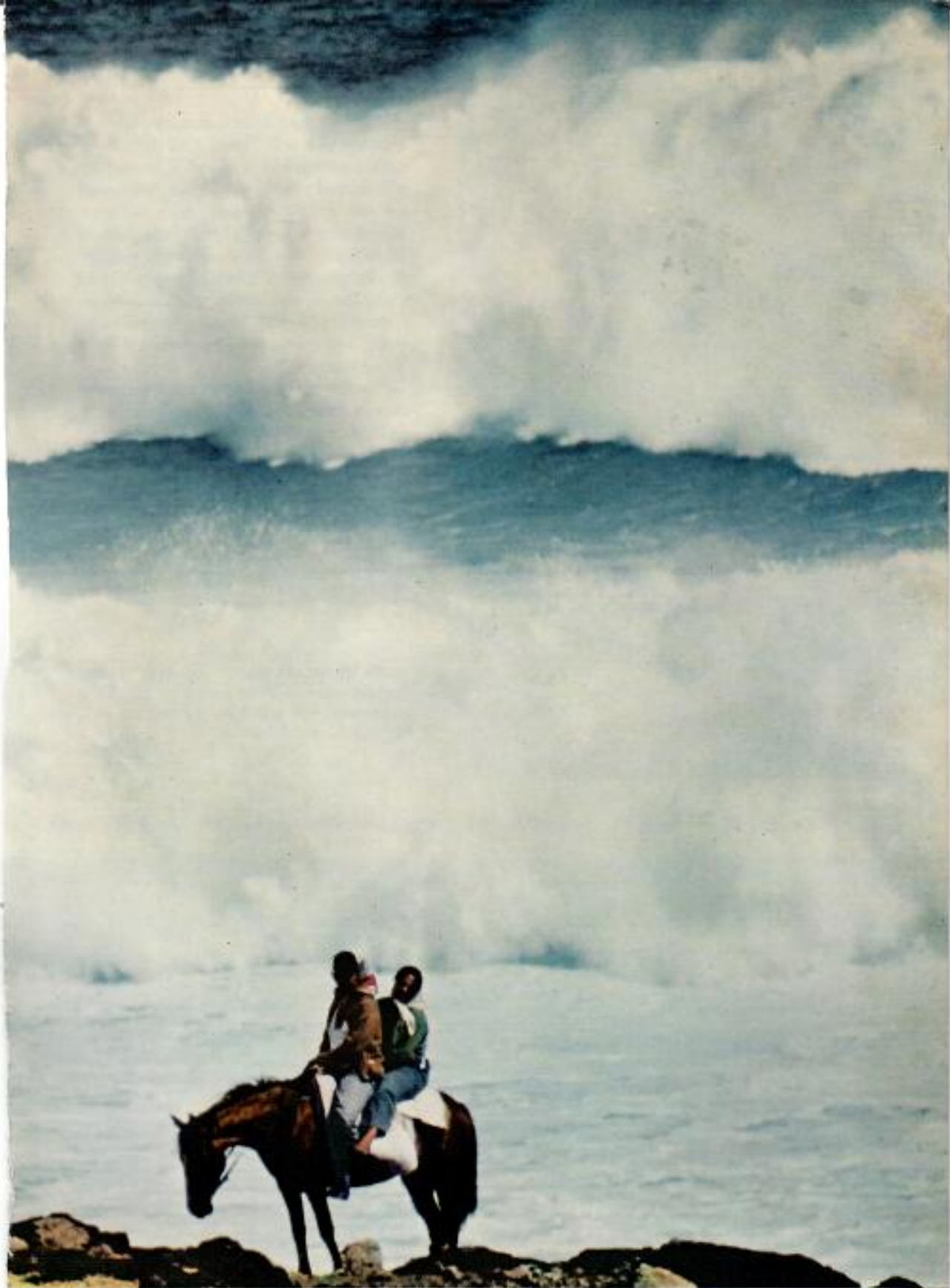
On my last day, all Rapa Nui gathered at the wharf to bid *Pinto* farewell

Stone chaperon ignores a couple visiting Raraku volcano. Their ancestors carved the giant centuries ago. Villagers seldom visit the quarry, eight miles away.

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Extinct volcano Rano Raraku cradles a fresh-water lake. Horsemen climb the crater's slope





KODAKSBORNE © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Chile, the governing power. Only scheduled visitor is the one supply ship a year. The island exchanges wool, its sole cash crop, for food and other neces-

sities. Horses, imported from the mainland in the last century, now outnumber the people. This pony carries a double load.

for yet another year. Before the islanders lay 12 months without mail, and probably without visitors—12 months of almost total isolation.

Father Sebastian rode out to the ship with us.

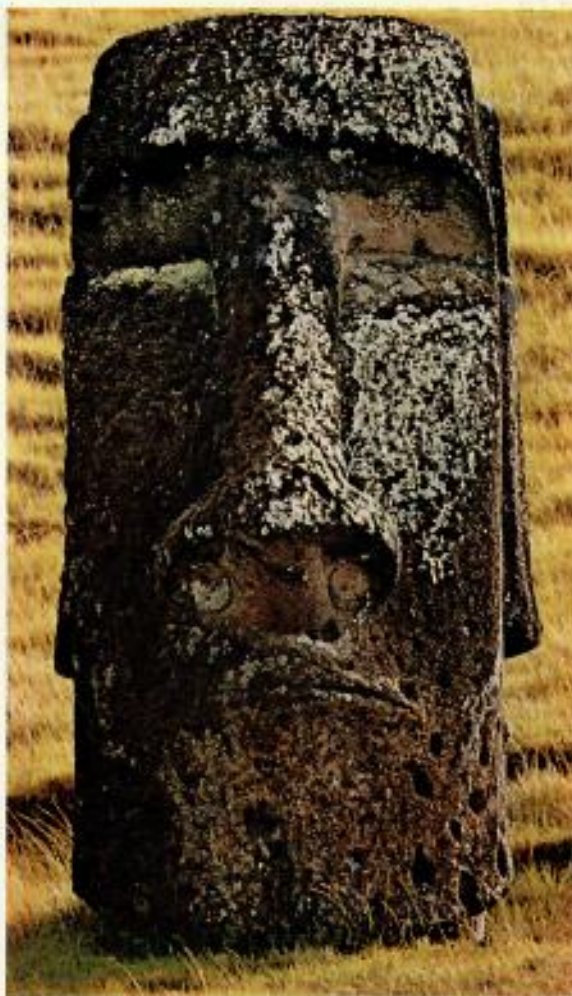
"Leaving Easter Island," he told me, "is unlike leaving any other place in the world. Why? Because all visitors know in their hearts that they will never come this way again. It is, I think, the saddest parting of all."

Shortly thereafter *Pinto* weighed anchor. Engines throbbing, the gray transport headed seaward.

I stood on the fantail in a lingering farewell, gazing back at the receding island. Familiar faces—Mateo, Santiago, Father Sebastian—blurred and disappeared. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the Navel of the World slipped into the immense void of the Pacific. The sun set upon an empty ocean, and I knew that Father Sebastian was right.

Lichen-covered face squints at the camera. Wind and weather pit the once-smooth carving. Long ears reflect the style of men who stretched their lobes with shell plugs.

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toward the statues at the far right

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