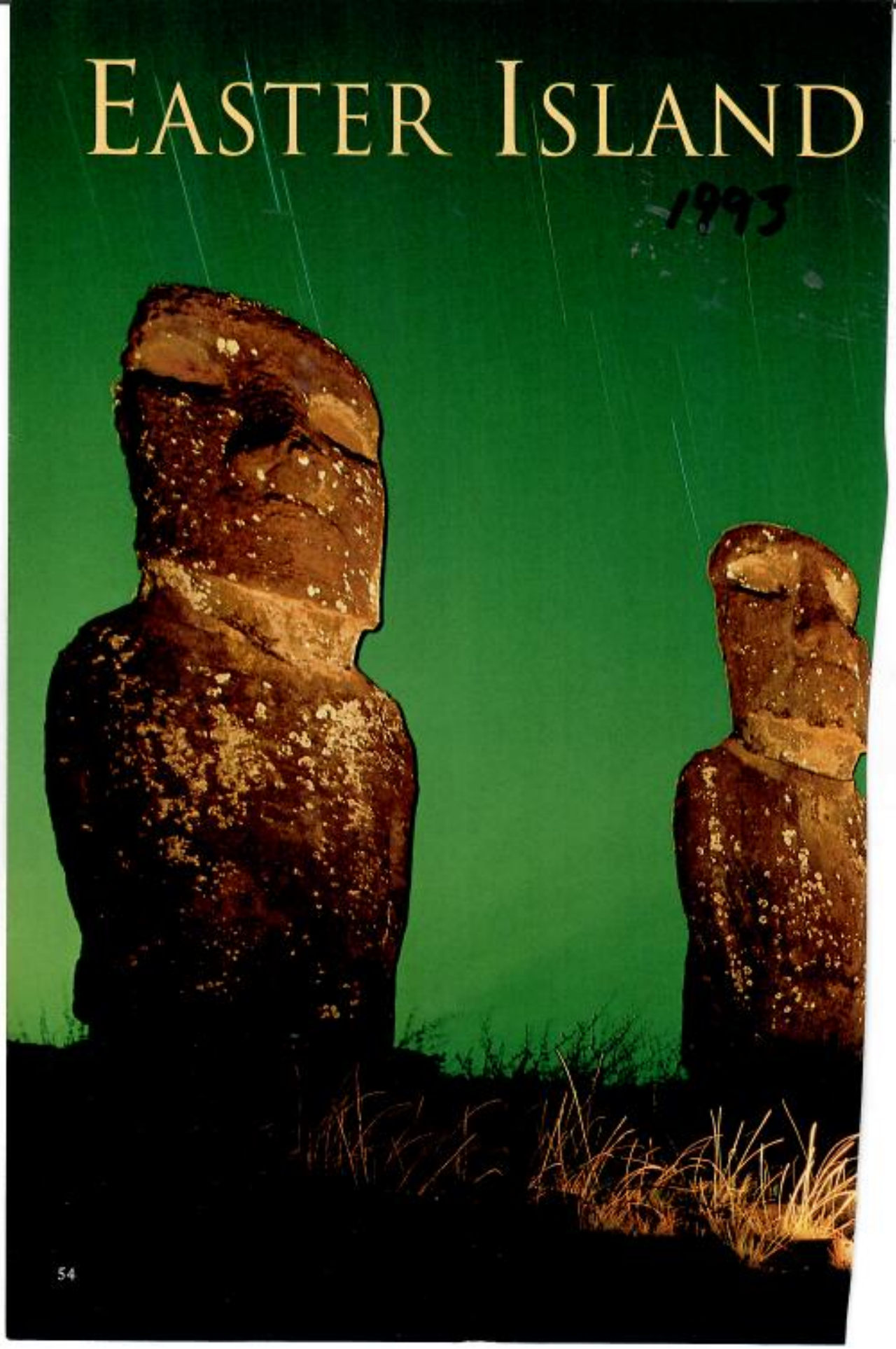
EASTER ISLAND

1993



UNVEILED

BY RICHARD CONNIFF

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB SACHA

Stony sentinels, carved centuries ago by Polynesian craftsmen, gaze over one of the most isolated places in the world. With their land depleted by overuse, islanders now draw on a renaissance of their culture to attract visitors and income.

SHOULD YOU FIND YOURSELF someday seated with your legs over the edge of a cliff on the coast of Easter Island, you may notice, after a time, that the horizon bends not merely out ahead of you, as it does off any coast, but all around, encircling you. The clouds arch forward from the other side of the planet, and the ocean is almost pregnant in its curvature. You begin to get a sense of where you are: on a rock in the center of a vast circle of sea.

The nearest major population center in Polynesia, Tahiti, is roughly 2,600 miles west across the Pacific. In the opposite direction, it is about 2,300 miles to Chile, of which Easter Island has been a part since its annexation in the 19th century. Hence this grassy triangle of volcanic outcrop has been called the most remote inhabited island in the world.

What I felt, sitting on that cliff one evening, wasn't merely isolation. I had spent the day wandering on horseback with Felipe Teao, a 73-year-old fisherman whose zeal for island lore was largely untainted by its potential for attracting tourists. We had traveled past petroglyphs, earth ovens, human bone fragments, and obsidian flakes. We had passed the huge stone statues, called *moai*, for which Easter Island is famous. They lay everywhere along the coast, toppled onto their foreheads from the *ahu*, or ceremonial platforms, where they once stood shoulder to shoulder, backs to the sea, lording over each clan's narrow territory with jutting jaws and coral eyes. Teao had also pointed out a few boat-shaped ahu with their landlocked prows rising toward the sea, as if hungry for the world or for escape from the universe defined by the moai.

I had an eerie sense of having dropped in on the remnants of an improbable biological experiment, on roughly these lines: Take 50 or so people, move them thousands of miles from home to a small island with no terrestrial mammals and only about 30 native plant species, make water scarce and agriculture marginal, minimize the chances for escape or outside influence, and check back after, say, a millennium to see what results.

To glance at the treeless hills of the island now, you might not expect much. Yet local legend records that at a crescent beach called Anakena (map, pages 60-61), two large voyaging canoes provisioned with crops and poultry arrived under the command of a chief named Hotu Matu'a, whose descendants still inhabit the island and regard him with disarming familiarity. (Teao could point out, among other things, the rock Hotu Matu'a used as a toilet.) Researchers generally date the coming of settlers at about A.D. 400. In time this meager band of colonists would grow to perhaps 7,000 people. They would parcel up the island into small territories and ultimately turn on one another in the drawn-out paroxysms of societal and environmental collapse. Throughout, the islanders put their mark on every surface of the landscape, while the landscape in turn shaped their souls.

Having spent his life exploring Easter Island and eking out a living from it, Teao was one of the few islanders left to know it with that old intimacy. As we scrambled under rock overhangs to

Grass skirts catch the wind as islanders, who call themselves Rapa Nui, welcome a tour group. The greeting is an innovation that stems from a heritage borne by Polynesian ancestors who sailed voyaging canoes across the Pacific.

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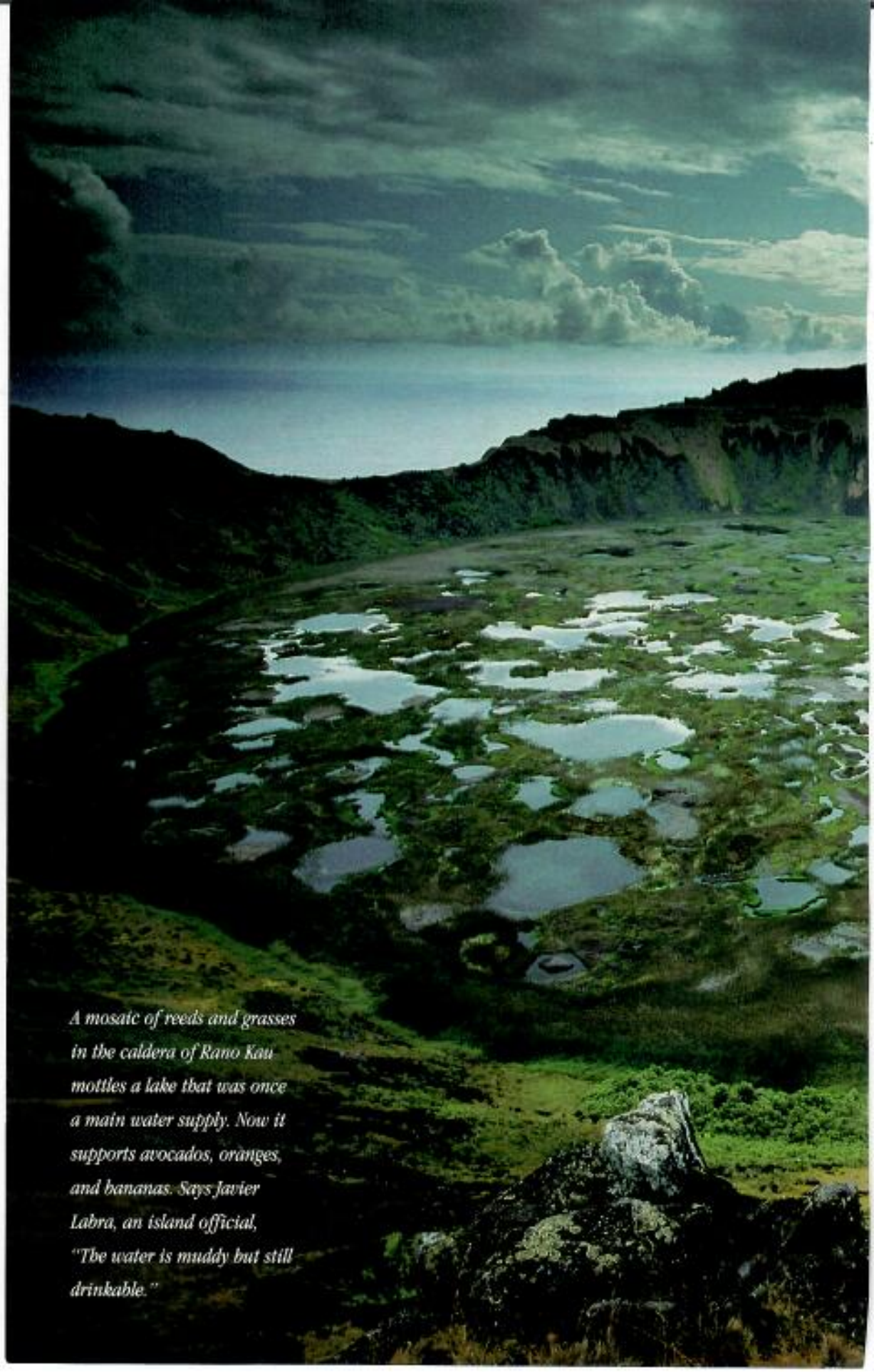
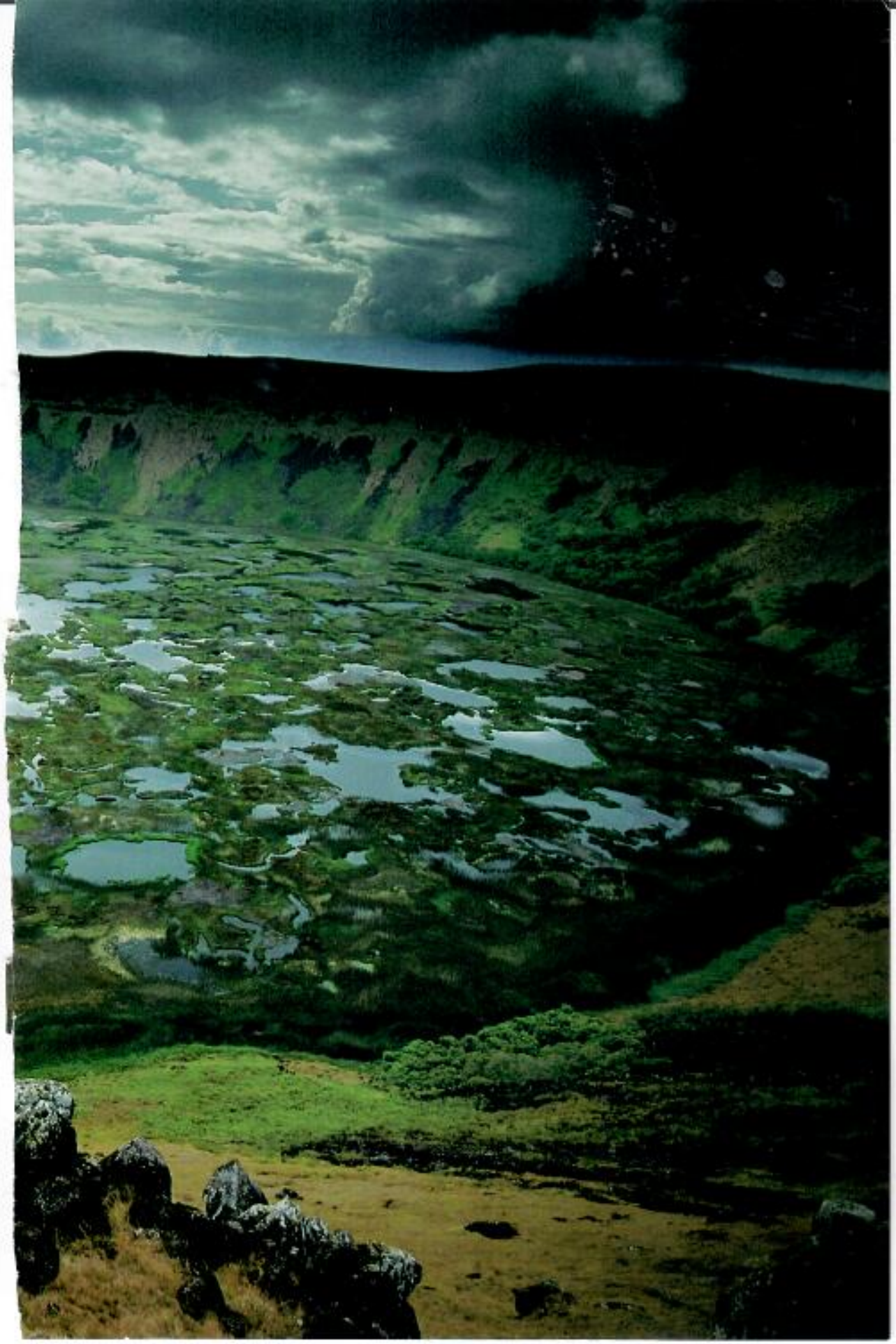
inspect petroglyphs, he recounted fragments of its bloody history. "Warriors used to be able to name any place where they killed a rival," he said at one point. Then he told a story about an inept warrior who killed only one enemy but cleverly butchered the corpse in four different places, naming each place after a body part. The names made Teao laugh with macabre admiration, shrewd exploitation of limited resources being an essential trait on the island.

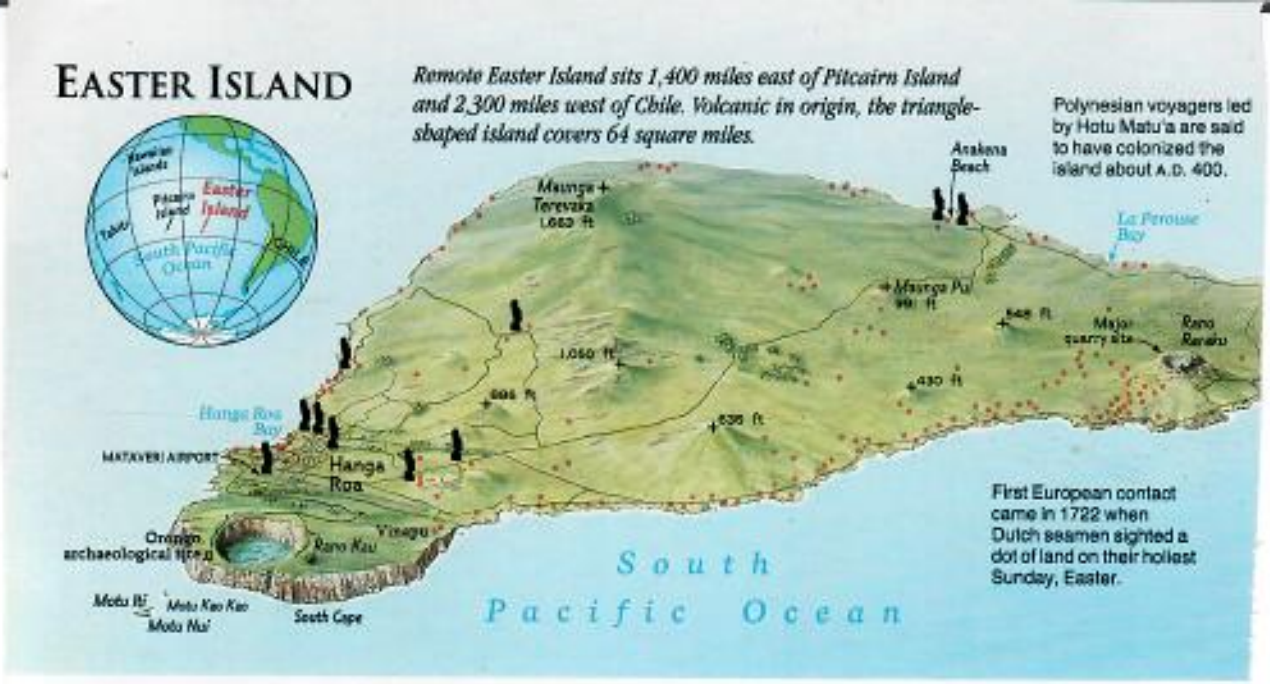
"I was diving at La Perouse after a storm," he remarked another time, "when I saw a skeleton come washing out with the tides, so I knew there had to be a cave there. . . ." What I felt listening to Teao wasn't so much the isolation of Easter Island but the richness of local knowledge and culture that isolation had produced.

Few archaeological sites in the world are as impressive as Easter Island, and none have evoked as much speculation or as much nonsense. The speculation has often turned on the premise that the Polynesians who still inhabit the island, people like Felipe Teao, could never have produced the solemn and imperturbable moai. Nor, to this way of thinking, could a "primitive" people transport



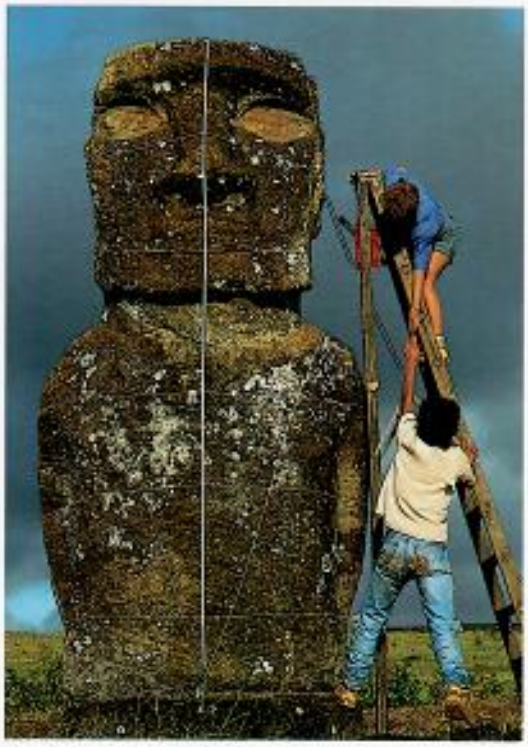
A mosaic of reeds and grasses in the caldera of Rano Kau mottles a lake that was once a main water supply. Now it supports avocados, oranges, and bananas. Says Javier Labra, an island official, "The water is muddy but still drinkable."





a 15-ton stone statue—much less hundreds of them—across the rock-stubbed landscape from the inland quarry at Rano Raraku to ahu along the coast.

One best-seller deemed it more plausible to attribute the giant statues to extraterrestrials equipped with antigravity machines (who inexplicably carved with stone picks). Somewhat more persuasively, author Thor Heyerdahl has argued in a series of books that the skilled stone carvers came from South America. In his view, Polynesians supplanted them little more than a century before Europeans discovered the island on Easter Sunday in 1722.

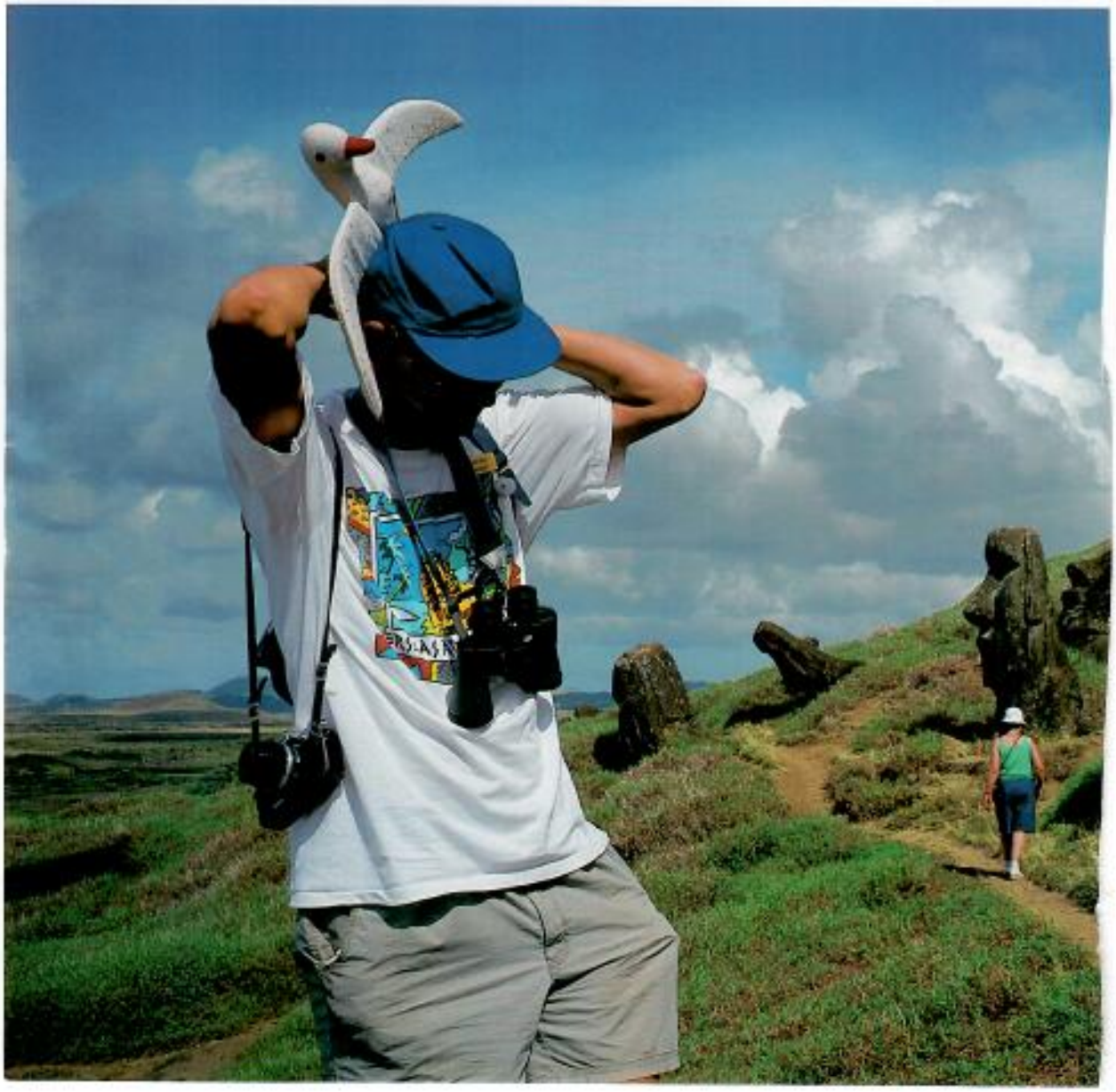


Heyerdahl's expedition in 1955-56 remains the watershed for world perceptions of Easter Island in this century. His team of researchers launched modern archaeology on Easter Island, and Heyerdahl, still acclaimed for having sailed the balsa raft *Kon-Tiki* from South America to Polynesia, won eager and enduring acceptance among the general public for his idea of the islanders' South American origin. But archaeologists have since accumulated ample evidence indicating that the founders of Easter Island's civilization were indeed Polynesians, and that their culture, including the great stone statues, was rooted solidly in Pacific island traditions.

Teao and I stopped for the night at a cave overlooking the northwest coast. The clouds above the rounded horizon of the mid-Pacific were puffy and placental, suffused with red by the setting sun. Teao set out breaded hooks from the rocks and came in with a mess of *nanue*, fish with succulent white flesh. We talked about old families and ancient beliefs. It seemed to me that local knowledge, ingenuity, and a Polynesian

In antiquity's workshop, some 400 moai in various stages of completion rest on Rano Raraku's slopes, where American guide Peter Alden (below) adjusts his whimsical hat.

Rapa Nui carvers chipped at soft volcanic tuff with heavy stone picks to shape the moai, ancestor figures with powers to mediate between the people



knack for colonizing even the most inhospitable oceanic rock were the reasons the descendants of Hotu Matu'a survive today. I spread out my sleeping bag on the cliff and went to sleep to the sound of waves rolling in from nowhere.

TWO OR THREE TIMES A WEEK NOW, a commercial 767 touches down from the mainland, the squeal of rubber on concrete reiterating the end of the island's ancient sequestration. For much of this century Easter Island's calendar was divided loosely in half, six months spent preparing for the arrival of the annual supply ship and six months spent recounting the foibles of its passengers. For the islanders, regular air service represents liberation from old constraints.

For visitors, on the other hand, especially for those who cling to the illusion of an island floating outside the currents of time, it can be unsettling to peer from the window of the plane and spot a row of glistening monuments, like moai, only to recognize them on closer inspection as fuel storage tanks.

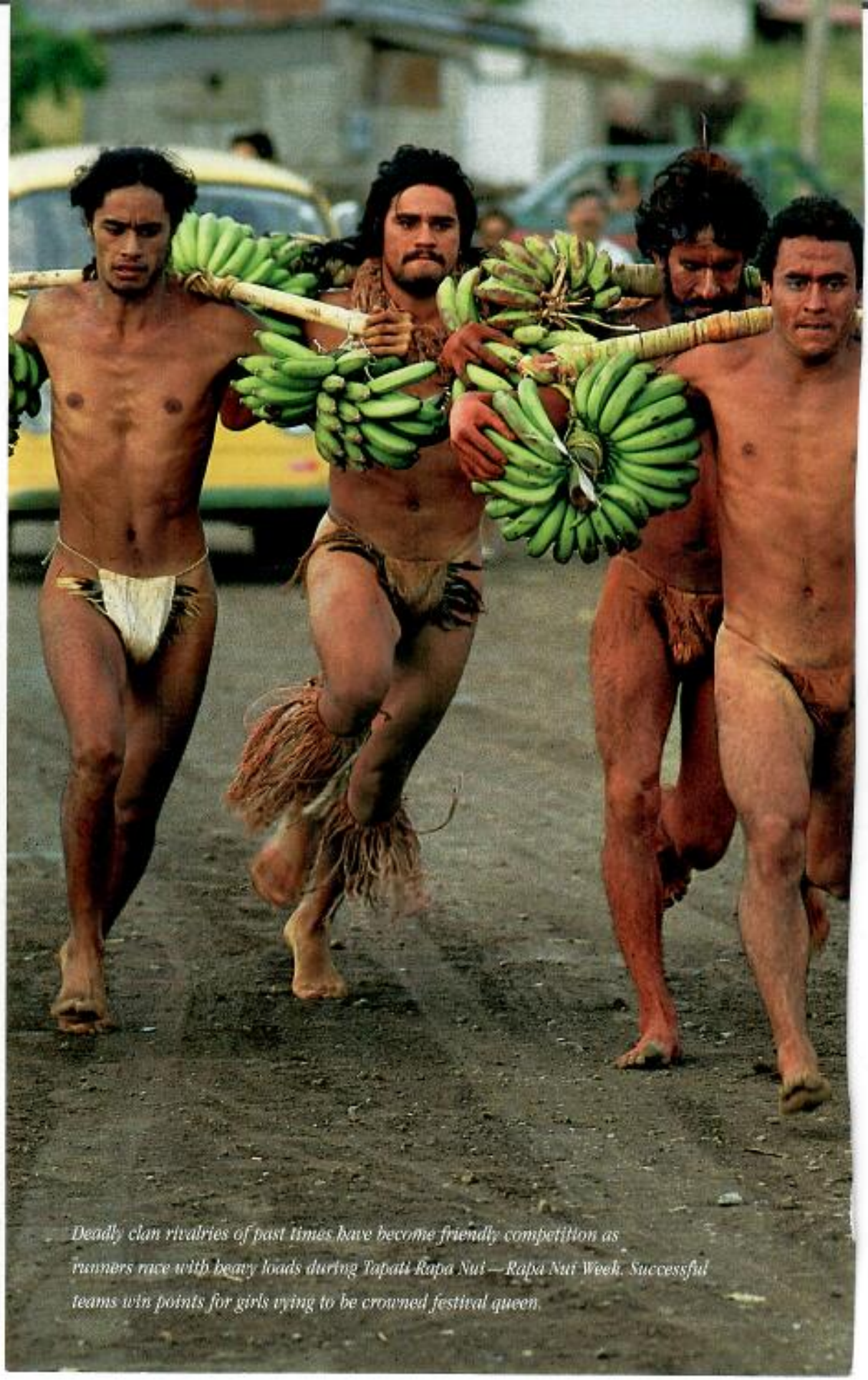
Modernization has brought 640 hotel and guesthouse beds, 530 motor vehicles, the telephone, and the fax machine to Easter Island. Almost all the island's 2,800 residents now live in the small town of Hanga Roa on the southwest coast, colonial authorities having moved the islanders there from their traditional territories in the 19th century. At night the phosphorescent blue of television sets, attended with something like devotion, illuminates the windows of the modest, one-story houses. Amber streetlights break up the mid-ocean gloaming. After the television station signs off at midnight, the discotheques come to life, and tourists mingle with islanders drinking pisco and Coke under the gaze of Day-Glo moai. The air reverberates almost till dawn with "Bette Davis Eyes" and a disco version of "Nothing Compares 2U."

The transformation of Easter Island dates from 1965, when a young schoolteacher wrote an open letter of protest to the Chilean government about conditions on the island. At that point, sheep far outnumbered people and had more freedom of movement; they grazed over almost 90 percent of the island. The islanders, known as Rapa Nui (a name of 19th-century origin meaning people of "Great Rapa"), were officially confined to Hanga Roa.

Islanders were rarely permitted to travel then, in part because of the parish priest's concern about the corrupting influence of the outside world. Their suppressed appetite for this influence was such that one islander born during World War II was nicknamed for the Führer ("*Hola,* Hitler," an acquaintance calls, and tourists' heads spin), while another was called London for the BBC shortwave opener, "This is London." The lure of freedom caused islanders in open fishing boats to sail away from the island nine times during the postwar years, most of them in the 1950s, when the Chilean Navy ruled with the help of occasional public floggings. Unaided by navigational equipment, three boats, including one piloted by Felipe Teao, ended up elsewhere in Polynesia, and a fourth on the Chilean coast; five disappeared.

The schoolteacher's protest led to the end of military rule and won Easter Island the civil status of any other community in Chile—along with the attendant bureaucracy imported from the mainland, apparently in part to guarantee a solidly Chilean

Taking the measure of a moai, *icon of chiefs and gods, UCLA archaeologist Jo Anne Van Tilburg proceeds with her investigations—more than ten years of documenting most of the island's one thousand statues. Using statistical analysis and computer imaging, she and colleagues from the University of Chile hope to answer questions that have perplexed many: Who carved the statues and why, and how were they transported?*



Deadly clan rivalries of past times have become friendly competition as runners race with heavy loads during Tapati Rapa Nui—Rapa Nui Week. Successful teams win points for girls vying to be crowned festival queen.

and the gods. Workers used sledges, wooden rollers, and bark ropes to haul finished statues along special roads. They then erected them on ahu, *or stone platforms.*

For centuries some of the ahu were used as burial chambers. Niko Haoa (left) peers for remains beneath an ahu whose statue has tumbled.

presence. The start of regular air service in 1967 created a tourist industry, and the old cashless society of families sharing the work of farming and fishing began to break apart, replaced by the colder logic of commerce.

"Things are getting better, but people have gotten worse," said Jorge Edmunds, one evening over tea at the Hotel Victoria, which he owns. At 72 Edmunds was balding and urbane, in silver-rimmed glasses. "The old family union is gone," he said. In the old system, large extended families lived close together in compounds, cooperating to the extent that a woman with many children might give her newborn to a less fortunate sister. "Now each one is for his own convenience. Except for a few families that have stayed together: the Pakaratis, the Edmundses." Someone else at the table raised an eyebrow, the Edmunds family being among the most modern in its business interests. "A little," he admitted. *"No mucho."*

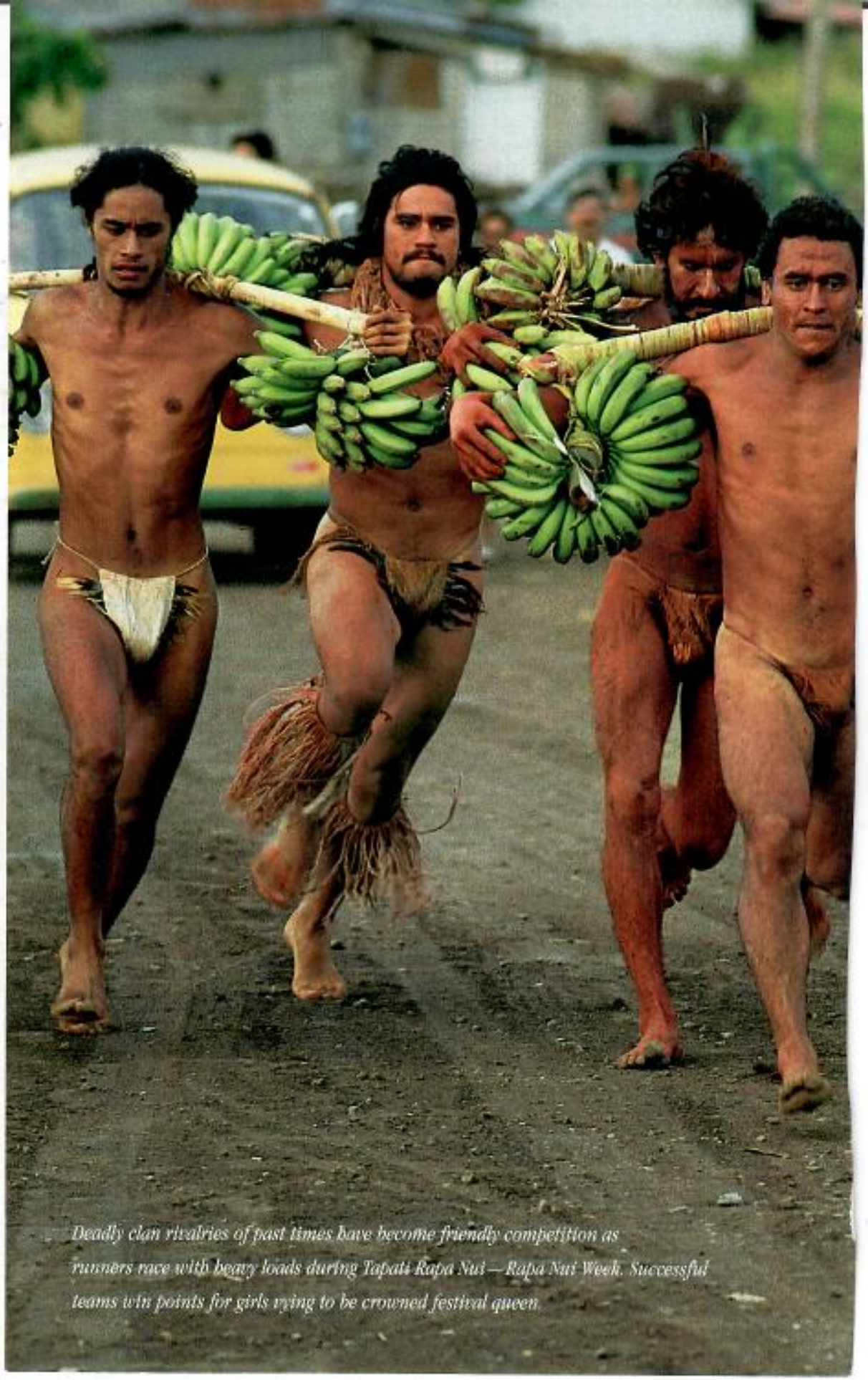
Another businessman then began eagerly chronicling improvements since the 1960s, when few houses had running water, much less telephones. But his tone also shifted subtly to ruefulness. "People were in the streets. Washing. Singing. It was a feast."

Few modern islanders would go back to that time, but they talk about it still with a sense of loss, and, like people recollecting a distant childhood, the conversation often turns on the powerful memory of food. Sheep were available for the taking in the 1950s, and chickens were as common as pigeons in a city park. Parties at which the meat was heaped in pyramids loom large in memory. "People used to go with carts to get food!" said Kiko Pate, the church choirmaster. "You can't imagine how beautiful it was."

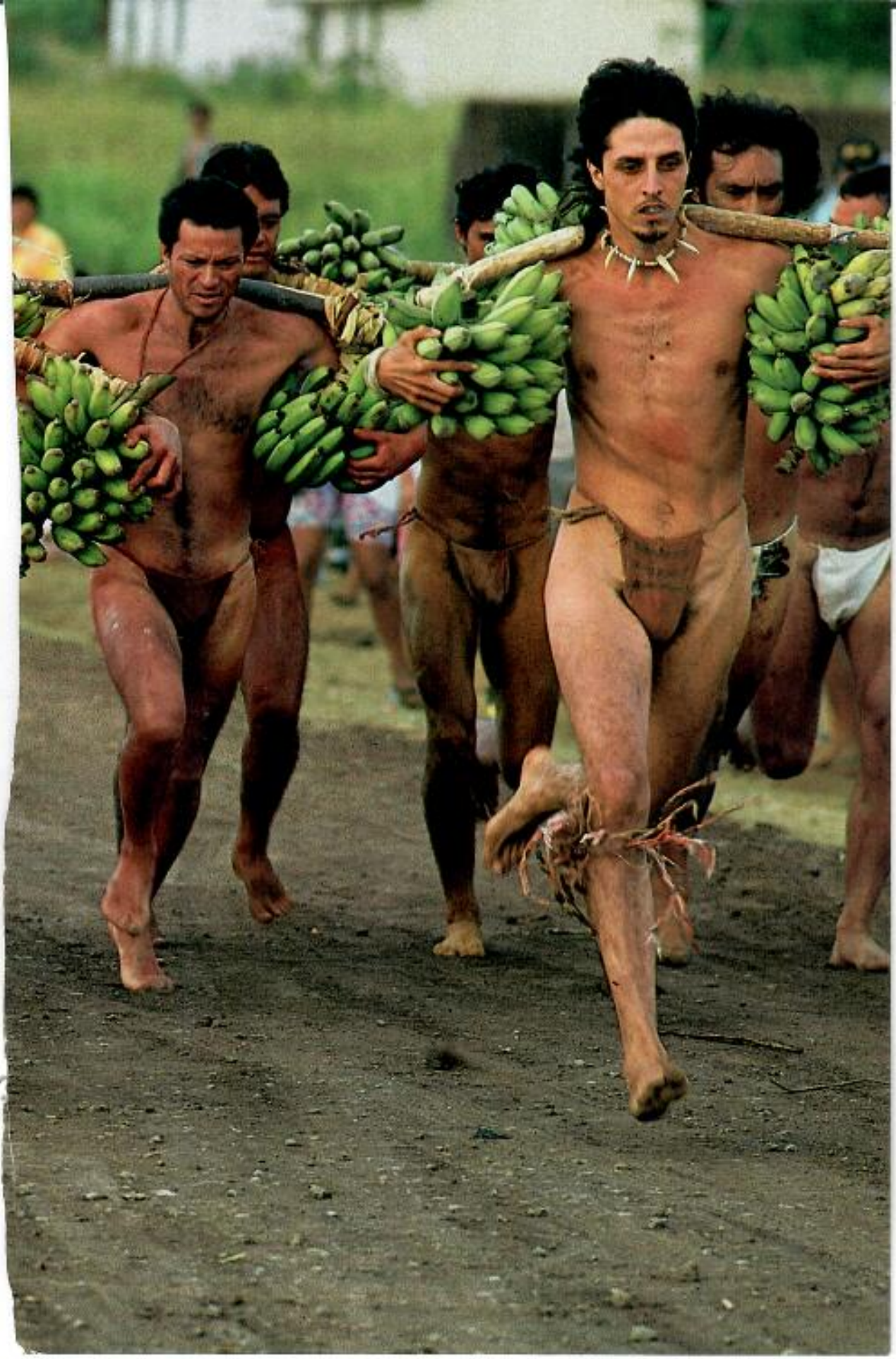
The sheep are gone now, fishing has fallen off, and agriculture is out of fashion (as well as being more difficult due to introduced pests). Baked bread is replacing the sweet potato as a staple food, and even chickens, which the Polynesians brought from Southeast Asia halfway around the world, arrive frozen from the mainland. "Now," Pate said, "everything is money, money."

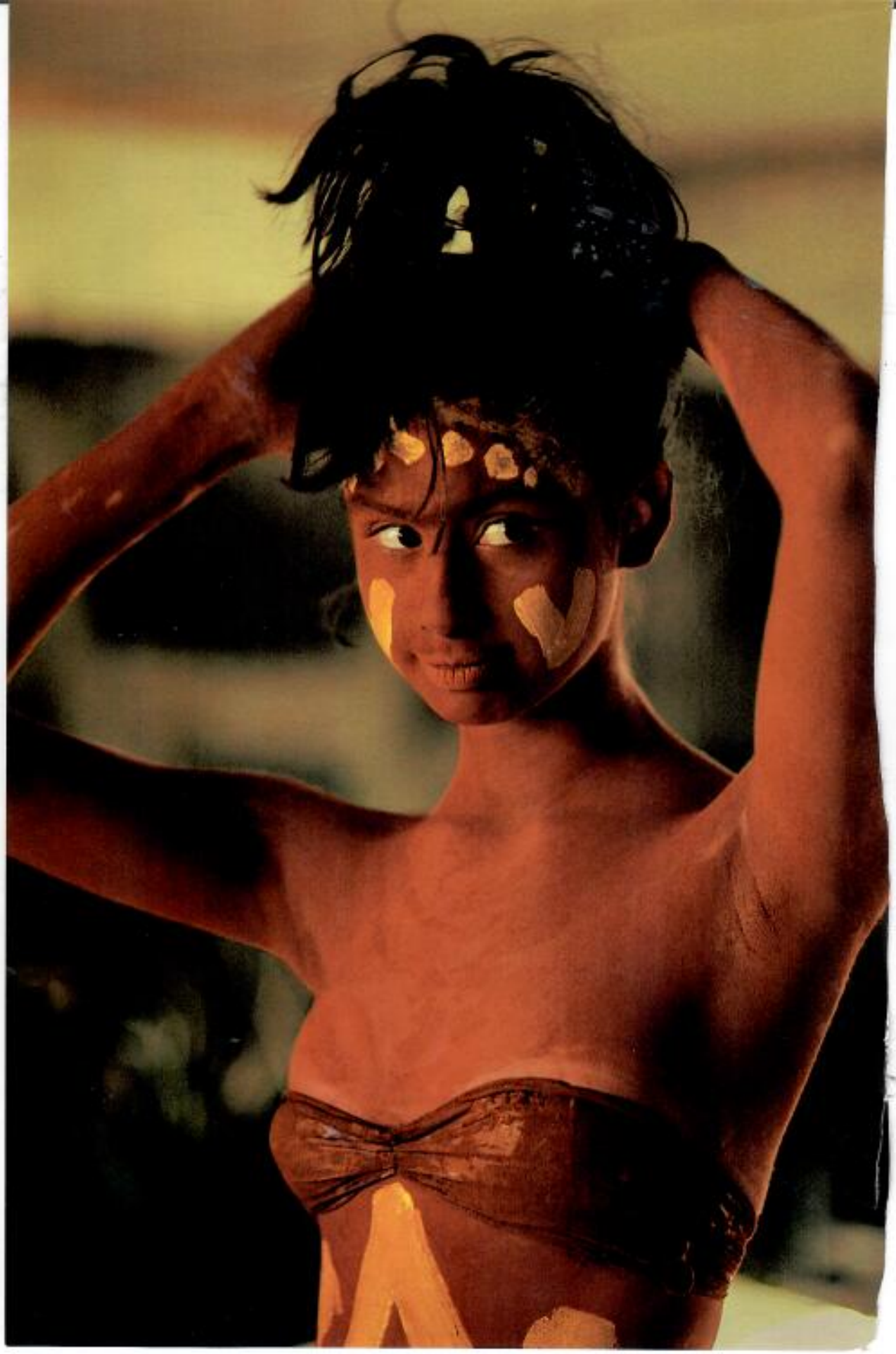
The sense of diminishing food is a handy symbol for the less tangible sense that spiritual sustenance is also diminishing as the Rapa Nui culture becomes watered down. Government workers and their families from the mainland, who account for nearly a quarter of the population, often serve as scapegoats for this change. "If you have a major, you have to have a captain," one islander said. "If you have a captain, you have to have a lieutenant." Thus with no serious crime, 30 uniformed officers and six investigators from the mainland poke around the island, and the solitary Rapa Nui among them is regarded by some as an informer. ("Just like his great-great-grandfather," Felipe Teao remarked, recounting a nasty piece of treachery committed by the policeman's family more than a century ago.)

But a certain outside influence was a cultural necessity for Easter Island. Rapa Nui incest laws are strict, and with everybody tracing their ancestry back to the same 30 or so couples who survived 19th-century Peruvian slave raiding and epidemics, legal romance had arrived at an impasse. A woman in her mid-40s told me that she grew up with only two eligible marriage partners on the island, both walleyed. For 15 years she has been seeing a man with whom she has a common ancestor in the past century, she said, and her



Deadly clan rivalries of past times have become friendly competition as runners race with heavy loads during Tapati Rapa Nui—Rapa Nui Week. Successful teams win points for girls vying to be crowned festival queen.





elders still hiss their phrase for incest: "Eating your own blood!"

Understandably many islanders seek mates outside the community, often resting their hopes on the "Easter Island passport," a catch phrase for their own exotic appeal in the eyes of wealthy tourists. In 1991 one such islander became the first HIV-positive Rapa Nui.

Mixed marriages abound. The children grow up in an atmosphere of freedom and safety. They surf on the big rollers of Hanga Roa Bay or draw circles in the dusty red streets for pitching marbles. Some of them work beside their elders in traditional pastimes. But like their parents they look increasingly to the outside world.

Many of today's parents were among the first Rapa Nui educated on the Chilean mainland in the 1970s, and having been ridiculed for their ignorance of Spanish, they are busily sparing their children the same fate. As a result, only one schoolchild in four now speaks Rapanui as a first language, down from three in four just 15 years ago. The grade school, which used to punish children for speaking their language, has responded by incorporating the island culture for the first time into its curriculum, with the help of a new textbook series in the Rapanui language. Some elders balk at the notion of culture as homework on an island where the culture once seeped from the very stones. Many modern parents, on the other hand, regard the local school as inferior. If they can afford it, they ship their children off to schools on the mainland, where they may have a better chance of succeeding in the modern world.

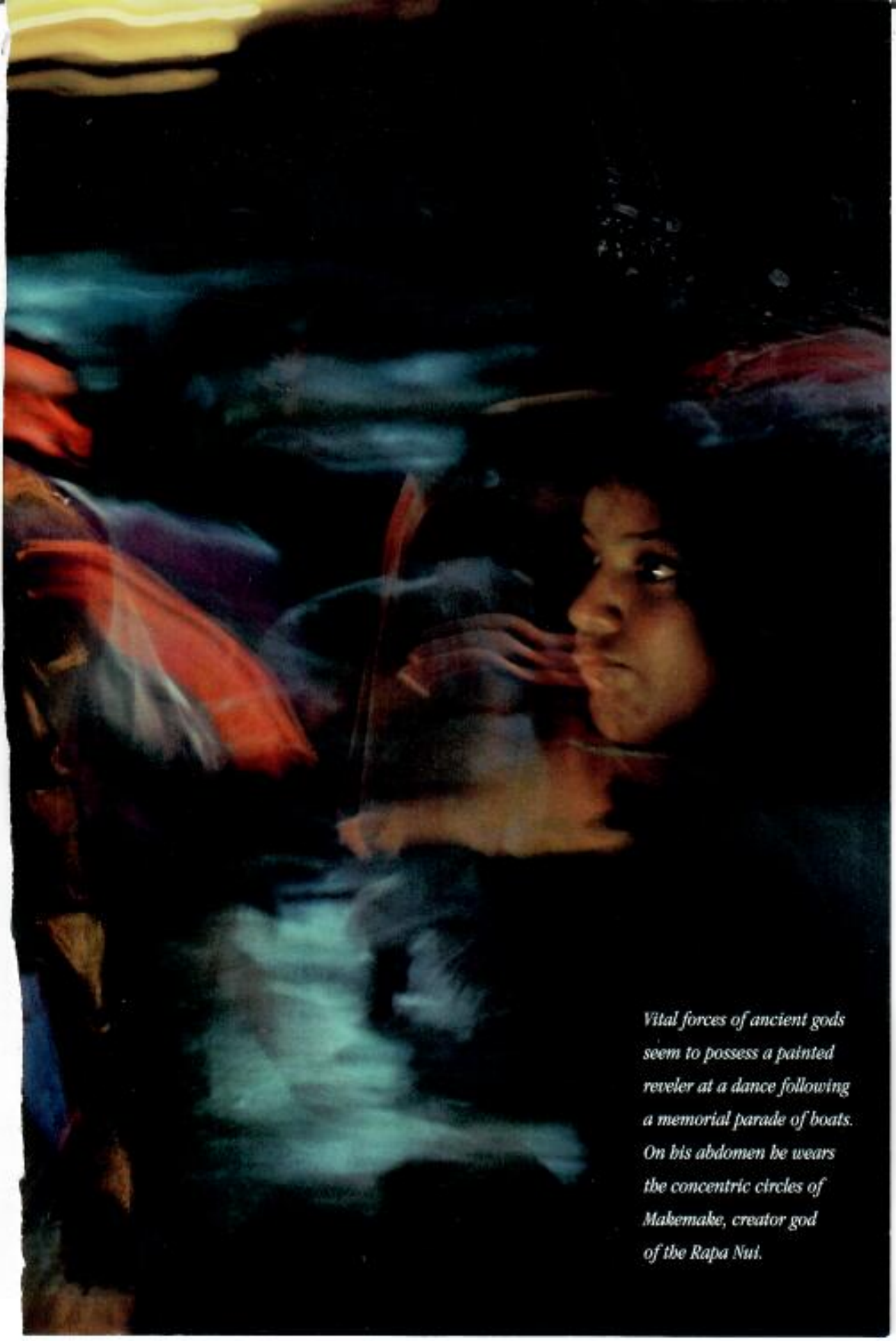
Painted from topknot to toe in the red pigment held sacred by her Rapa Nui ancestors, 13-year-old Kovira Avila Pakarati participates in a reenactment of the landing of Hotu Matu'a. A thousand and more years before Columbus, the Rapa Nui believe, the chieftain loaded canoes with artisans and crops and set out from "a great island to the west." After weeks at sea his party came ashore to settle Easter Island.

Kovira and other celebrants paddle along the coast in decorated boats to Hanga Roa, the island's only town. On landing, they chant, they dance, and they sing the songs of their forebears in the shadow of the moai.

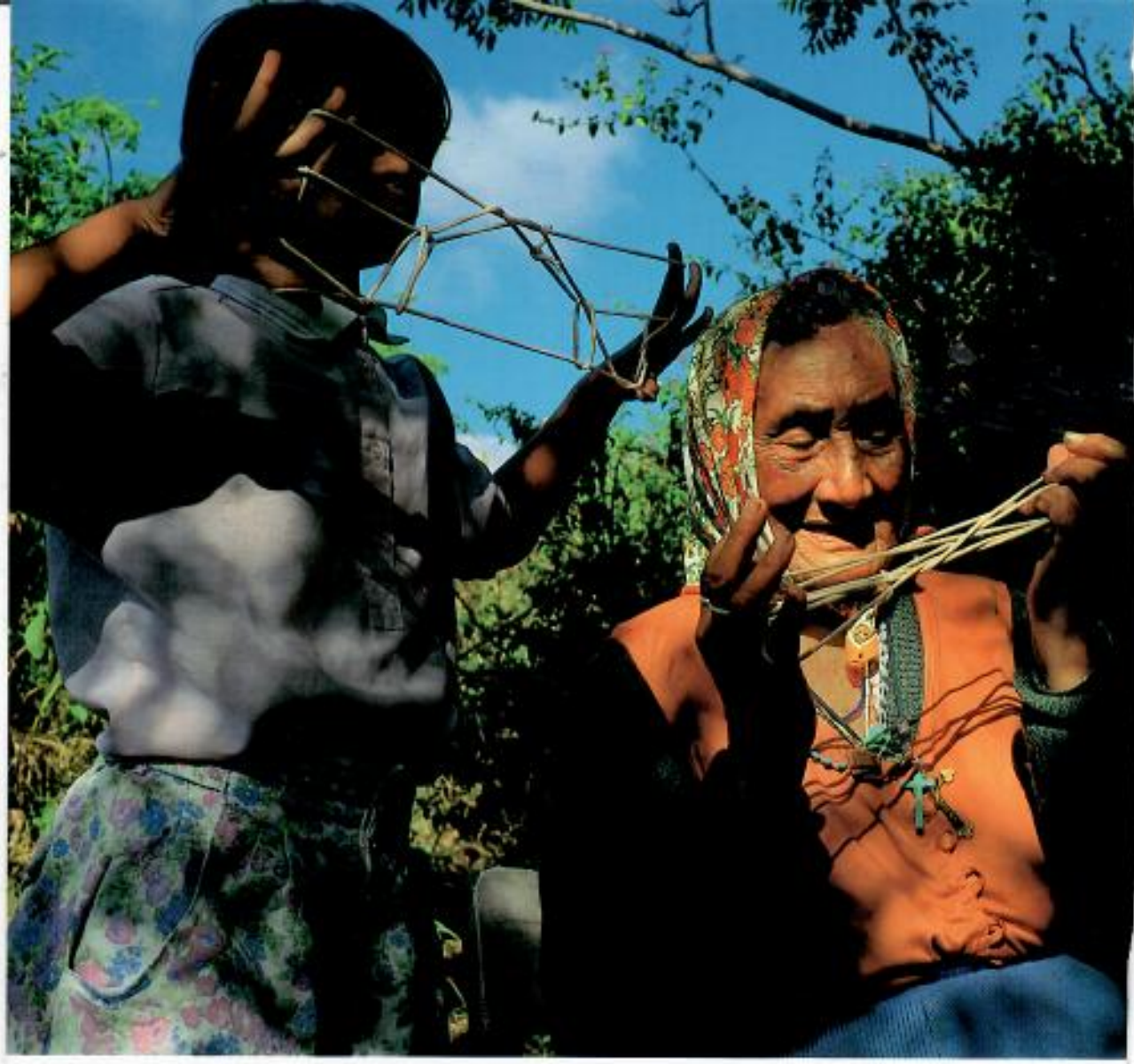
THE FIRST TIME I VISITED THE PAKARATIS, one of the few families where children still grow up in the oral tradition, I met Amelia Tepano Ika, the materfamilias. A lively, toothless old woman with gray hair pulled back in an orange bow, she came out into the yard bent over her bamboo cane. Sitting in the shade of a *miro tahiti* tree, Amelia demonstrated *kai kai*, the traditional cat's cradle game of patterns formed with a loop of string around the fingers, accompanied by song. A great-granddaughter, just in from school, dropped a pink plastic Mickey Mouse lunch box on the grass and, taking out a loop of string to shape on her own fingers, stood behind and mouthed the words of the songs (pages 70-71).

Amelia picked out strands with her lips to bring order to the pattern and said that, over time, she had passed on 300 or 400 of these games to the young girls in her family. The string no longer moved smoothly on her stiffened fingers. Leaning against her, the great-granddaughter, whom Amelia had taught, began to reteach her, reaching in to adjust the strings or filling in the words when the old woman stumbled. Both of them formed a web of triangles, symbolic of their sex, and chanted about how the most beautiful woman on the island used to be chosen during an annual feast at the ceremonial site called Orongo. For a moment the culture lived in two voices together, one growing stronger, the other more frail.

I went out one day with Eva Pakarati, of whom an acquaintance had said, "She lives on another island, the old island." That island persists in *el campo*, the countryside, to which the islanders retreat when they tire of living with cars and discotheques and among neighbors who know their histories back to Hotu Matu'a. Eva, who was 61, went there daily, to gather seashells to string into



Vital forces of ancient gods seem to possess a painted reveler at a dance following a memorial parade of boats. On his abdomen he wears the concentric circles of Makemake, creator god of the Rapa Nui.



necklaces for the tourist trade or to eat fish with her sisters. She crossed the wet rocks by the sea with her light cotton skirt gathered up and flip-flops on her feet, effortless and agile as a girl.

Eva recollected traveling the island as a child with her father, who stopped at each prominent rock and made her repeat legends word for word as if they were part of a catechism. The sense of place was ingrained in her in a way almost unfathomable to an American. We passed a *komari,* a vulva etched in the stone. Representations of male or female genitals are found everywhere on the island, carved with characteristic candor as talismans of a family's reproductive strength. Eva flicked the ash of her cigarette at it as she strode past. "Our relative," she said.

The old familial territories of el campo afford the islanders a sense of being profoundly at home, the offspring of this komari and of this piece of earth. For some the appeal of family caves remains especially strong; in 1987 an old man set off hoping to climb into his cave and die there in the belly of his homeland (his body was

Tales of the old are preserved for the young as Amelia Tepano Ika and her great-granddaughter practice kai kai, *storytelling with string illustrations and chants. As most Rapa Nui children speak only Spanish, kai kai helps them learn the ancestral language as well as their traditions.*

recovered in open country and given a Christian burial). Another islander I talked with could remember being rushed out to his family cave as a child when the cry, "*Ko te miro!* A ship!" was shouted from house to house across Hanga Roa. He was hidden just as children had been during two turbulent centuries of sporadic visits by slave and merchant ships. Even in the 1930s, he said, some people "thought they were going to be killed by every ship that arrived."

Along with the possibility of refuge, the sense of danger also persists in the countryside. *Aku aku*, good and evil spirits, are still thought to guard old family territories. Eva led me past their images carved into the flat rocky boundaries between clans. I saw nothing at first. Then the clouds shifted and the shadows changed, revealing sharks, skulls, octopus-like women, and other creatures. Eva told a story about a sister who found an ancient wood statue in the countryside one day and took it home. She died soon after, said Eva, having offended the spirits of the land.

AT SUNSET it was placid on the reed-fringed lake in the middle of the crater called Rano Raraku. Great stone statues stood on the slopes below the cliffs where they were carved, basking like sunbathers on the deck of a ship. Wandering along the cliffs, I could see across the low, western edge of the crater, to where a smoky haze drifted through the blue cinder cones at the other end of Easter Island.

The crater walls were inhabited by about 400 statues in various stages of completion, embedded in the stone where they were carved, face up, face down, canted over on one shoulder, so close together that visitors contemplating one moai often realize with a start that the grass they are standing on has grown up in the angular eye socket of another. As the evening light changed, nondescript rock walls suddenly revealed themselves before me as fully formed moai, the green lichen no longer obscuring the tubular noses, flared nostrils, and pursed lips. Walking alone here was like tiptoeing among sleeping giants.

Over the sound of the breeze on the cliff top, lifting and falling like human breath, a distant thudding reached me and grew louder. Spooked, I turned and saw two unsaddled horses gallop through a break in the opposite crater wall, trailing veils of dust. A hawk-like caracara soared watchfully over the rim of the crater and descended to perch on the brow of an upright moai. Then it was quiet again.

Here Thor Heyerdahl was inspired to write, "One thing is certain: This was not the work of a canoeload of Polynesian wood carvers who set to work on the bare rock faces when they landed merely because they could find no trees to whittle." On the contrary, at Rano Raraku, Heyerdahl and his team found some of their most impressive evidence for his argument that the culture came from South America: A petroglyph carved on the torso of a half-buried moai depicting a three-masted ship, which Heyerdahl considered a South American type, and the reeds in the crater lake, which he said had been introduced by South Americans, who used them for building just such ships.

Heyerdahl depicted Easter Island's civilization collapsing in racial conflict in which statue-carving Long Ears from South America were annihilated by menial Short Ears from Polynesia. Or

Preaching against television and nightclubs, Father Luis Riedl delivers a sermon on the feast day of the Immaculate Conception. Missionaries from Chile introduced Christianity in the 1860s, and today most islanders are Roman Catholic.

as Heyerdahl put it, "with the arrival of the genuine Polynesians, all cultural life came to an abrupt end."

The public embraced the ideas of the swashbuckling "Señor Kon-Tiki." Archaeologists, on the other hand, detected cultural bias in Heyerdahl's disparagement of Polynesians, and they began to pick holes in his argument. The three-masted ship, they said, was less likely to be a South American reed boat than a European square-rigger, like several others carved around the island after 1722. Moreover, the reeds themselves failed the test for importation by South Americans; pollen analysis demonstrated that they had been growing in Easter Island's crater lakes for at least 30,000 years.

The most comprehensive reply to Heyerdahl's arguments was the Easter Island Archaeological Survey, a cooperative Chilean-American effort begun in 1968 and now nearly completed. Survey teams sketched, mapped, and measured 19,000 features on the island, among them 240 ahu, 886 moai, 2,536 earth ovens, and

3,244 house foundations representing 15 centuries of occupation.

The results do not exclude the possibility of South American contact, but they make Polynesian origin far more likely. For example, Heyerdahl singled out one ahu, called Vinapu, and likened it to the stonework of Tiahuanaco, "the mightiest ruins in South America." But Tiahuanaco was the crowning achievement of an empire, while the ahu of Easter Island stood at the heart of local villages. Survey archaeologists found a far greater resemblance to the stone altars with raised slabs or posts common throughout Polynesia. Easter Island ahu differed from the general Polynesian pattern chiefly in that the human figures that stood on them were so large and sophisticated.

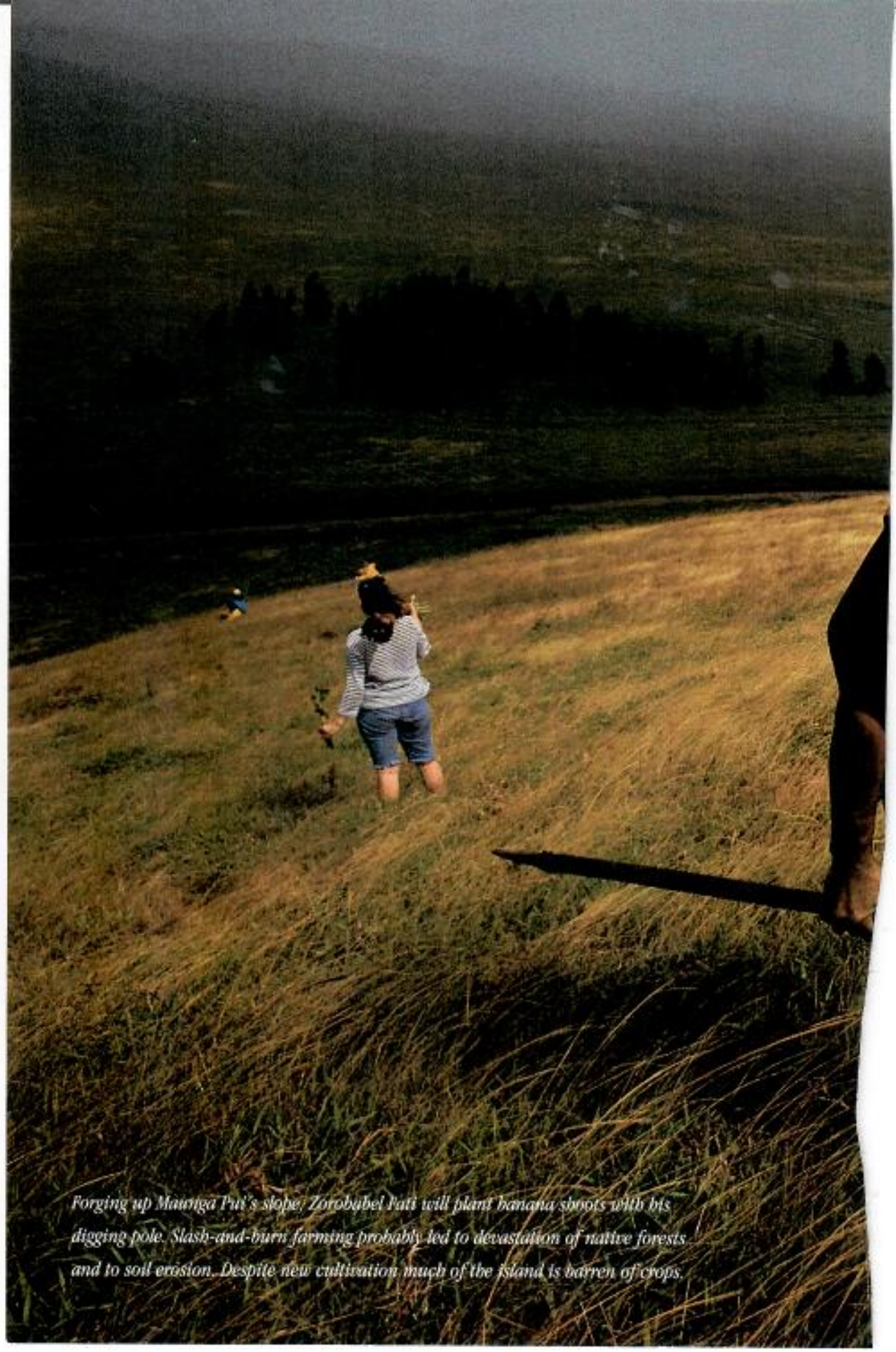
Heyerdahl's work also provoked a reconsideration of Polynesian voyaging. In 1976 a crew of Pacific islanders, organized by Ben Finney of the University of Hawaii, sailed a replica of a traditional double canoe from Hawaii to Tahiti and back. Apart from

Mixing European tradition with a novel touch, a Chilean groom removes his Rapa Nui bride's garter with his teeth. Since most islanders are related and local incest laws are very strict, many Rapa Nui seek mates from the mainland.

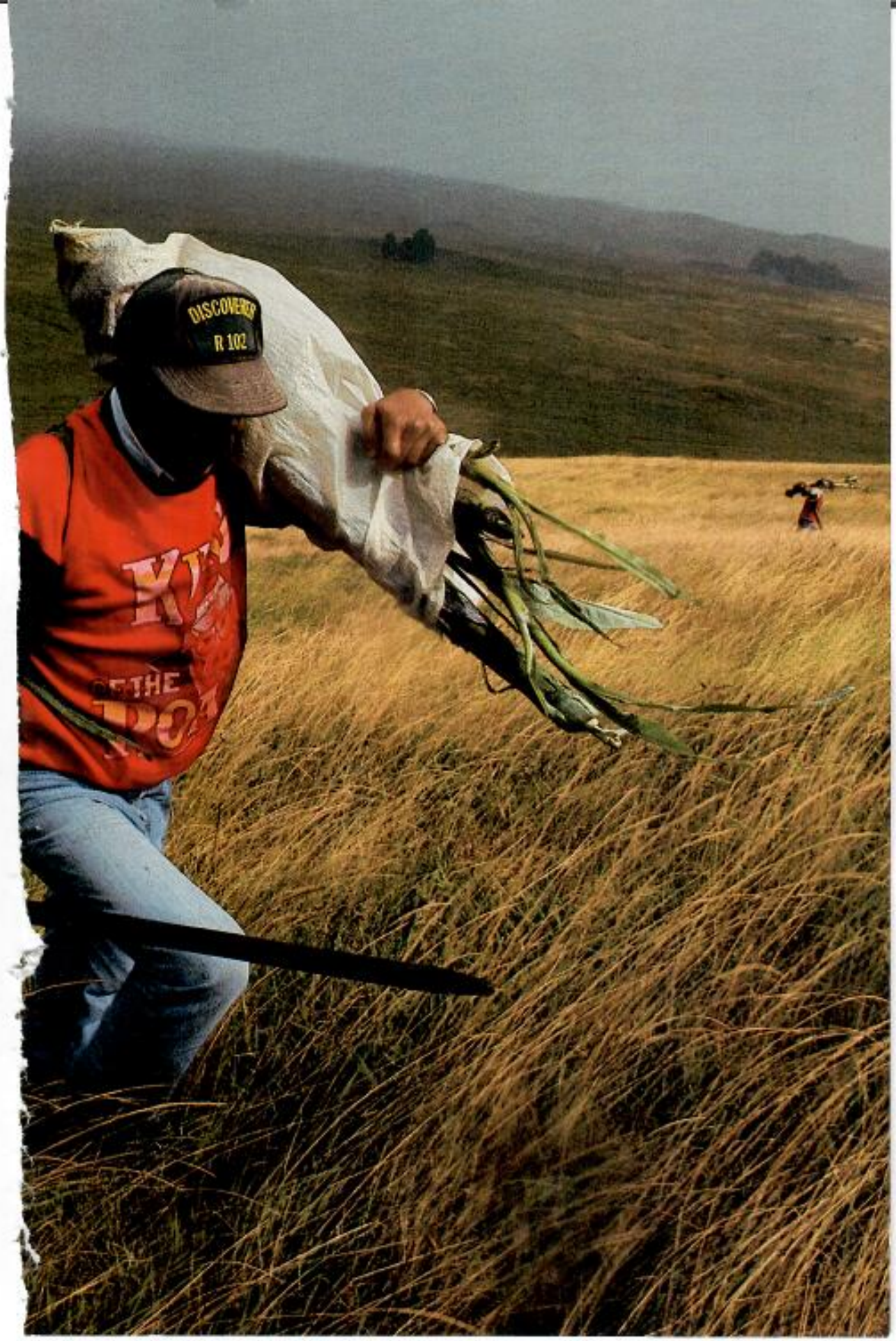
demonstrating the practicality of such a trip, Finney was interested in the strength of the Polynesian voyaging spirit.

The Polynesians were adept explorers and colonizers, and experience earlier in the Pacific had taught them that the best way to escape war or famine was to sail east, to windward, in search of new islands. They were apparently willing (as was Felipe Teao in the 1950s) to set out despite strong odds that they would not reach land.

Finney has estimated their probable rate of failure. While routine among colonizing species in the animal world, it is appalling for humans: Assuming that ten canoeloads of explorers, traders, and would-be colonists from different islands disappeared every year, with 25 people in each, 500,000 people may have died over the 2,000 years of Polynesian voyaging. And once, 50 people got to Easter Island. The archaeological survey has found no evidence to suggest that anyone else reached the island between the arrival of these first colonists and discovery by Europeans or to support the



Forging up Mauŋga Pui's slope, Zorobabel Fati will plant banana shoots with his digging pole. Slash-and-burn farming probably led to devastation of native forests and to soil erosion. Despite new cultivation, much of the island is barren of crops.


DISCOVERY
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notion of a clash between two cultures. Easter Island after A.D. 400 appeared to be a closed system with its own cultural evolution.

To get some hint of what the founders of this grand biological experiment faced, I went out one evening with Gerardo Velasco, a government agronomist with a passion for the botanical life of his adopted island. Velasco led the way over a cliff and down across huge pitted blocks of black volcanic rock; the sea crashed in below us and pitched a fine drifting mist overhead. At the foot of the cliff, he pointed out perfect cylindrical holes, some of them two or three feet in diameter, where the shape of ancient tree trunks had been preserved in the lava that flattened them.

"There's no doubt that these were palm trees, from the pattern of the bark there," Velasco said, "and then these tubes are so perfectly cylindrical."

Easter Island was, in fact, forested for most of its history, its present appearance to the contrary. Settlers gradually cleared the forest to plant the taros, yams, sweet potatoes, bananas, sugarcane, and paper mulberries they carried with them in their canoes. Wood, along with stone, also served as the artistic material in which the colonizers took their Polynesian heritage and slowly shaped it into the unique art of Easter Island.

Island carvers also quickly recognized the sculptural possibilities and relative permanence of the soft volcanic tuff from Rano Raraku, and the great epoch of carving moai and raising them on ahu began. Researchers explain this artistic flowering partly in terms of increasing mastery over the new environment: For a clan to produce a moai meant that it was able to maintain its carvers at Rano Raraku, to manufacture ropes from tree bark for lowering the statue from the cliff face, to cut down tree trunks for the sledges and rollers used in transporting the statue, and to feed scores of people as they hauled the statue home from Rano Raraku.

But Polynesians did not merely manipulate the environment; they sometimes destroyed it, and the island archaeological record is rich with species they caused to become extinct. On Easter Island, researchers believe that the growing population and rapid deforestation for agriculture and for the moai cult drove ancient rivalries to a high pitch, which in turn accelerated the rate of environmental destruction. Clans sometimes toppled their own aging statues to build bigger, better ones, their surfaces polished with coral. The new moai testified to the enduring strength of the clan. This monumental competition apparently continued until depletion of island resources made it insupportable, and the clans turned on one another in warfare and cannibalism. Legend records that the last palm was cut down during conflict in the 19th century.

Sunday catch, a prize yellowtail, lights the smile of Ruben Figueroa—and tempts one of his cats. The shoemaker, who moved to Easter Island from Chile in 1975, fishes with his friends on weekends from the island's rocky cliffs. Islanders rely on fish such as tuna, yellowtail, and mahi mahi as a prime food source.

AN AIR OF BLOODY HAVOC still hangs over the landscape from the period after 1500. While some of the moai have been resurrected by archaeologists, most still lie with their bases propped on the front edge of the ahu and their heads in the dirt. They peer at their neighbors from empty eye sockets, as if asking whether it is safe yet to get up again. In places they are littered like corpses after a battle: a broken head, thrown backward in the sand, with only the gaping nostrils exposed to the air or a figure buried in displaced rocks, with a green tendril feeling its way across the cheekbone.

Nor does the island want for human remains. I crouched down one afternoon to peer under a low rock overhang, and as I balanced there, my eyes adjusting to the darkness, I realized I was staring at a human skull, rolled on its side, its front teeth missing. I moved aside some debris and found the jaw lying nearby in a litter of ribs and femurs. It had the rounded "rocking chair" jawline characteristic of Polynesians, a trait anthropologist George Gill at the University of Wyoming recently identified in 48 percent of the Easter Island skulls he studied.

Physical evidence of cannibalism also occurs, along with legends that generally have to do with hunger rather than ritual, as if rival clans constituted a sort of free-ranging delicatessen. The evening I

climbed Rano Raraku, I paused among the monumental statues on the outside slope and looked out to Motu Marotiri, a high black pedestal of rock rising out of the sea off the southeast coast. I was haunted by the notion that the same deforestation that caused Rapa Nui civilization to cave in on itself had probably also cut off escape: No large trees meant no canoes capable of long-distance voyaging. Legend recalls that islanders frightened of rival clans swam out and sought refuge crowded on the barren rock of Marotiri. Even there the warriors organized raids to kill them and carry their corpses back to the main island, to be eaten.

For me the most disconcerting and unexpected aspect of Easter Island was the penetrating sensation at that moment that this brilliant civilization could have collapsed into such desperation. What happened to the Rapa Nui suggested that uncontrolled

growth and the impulse to manipulate the environment past the breaking point were not merely aspects of the industrialized world; they were the human condition. Thus the biological experiment on Easter Island went fatally awry.

WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT their heritage today, the name the Easter Islanders themselves invoke with greatest esteem, after Hotu Matu'a, is William Mulloy, a little-known archaeologist at the University of Wyoming who first came to the island with Heyerdahl. After a brief flirtation with the South American hypothesis, Mulloy began the research that produced persuasive evidence of the culture's Polynesian roots. He launched the archaeological survey and oversaw careful restorations, rebuilding stone houses and resurrecting toppled moai. Mulloy's work offered the islanders, for the first time in centuries, a glimpse of what they had been at the height of their civilization. His work gave the islanders a Rapa Nui identity to cling to in the face of the final influx of the outside world. "By restoring the past of his beloved island," a memorial plaque declares, "he also changed its future."

About Heyerdahl, on the other hand, the islanders tend to be ambivalent. His book *Aku-Aku* turns on his discovery that the islanders had secret family caves in which ancient stone carvings were still hidden, some of them, in his view, hinting at South American antecedents. By the power of his personal aku aku and the prestige of science, Heyerdahl persuades the superstitious natives to open the caves to him and sell the contents.

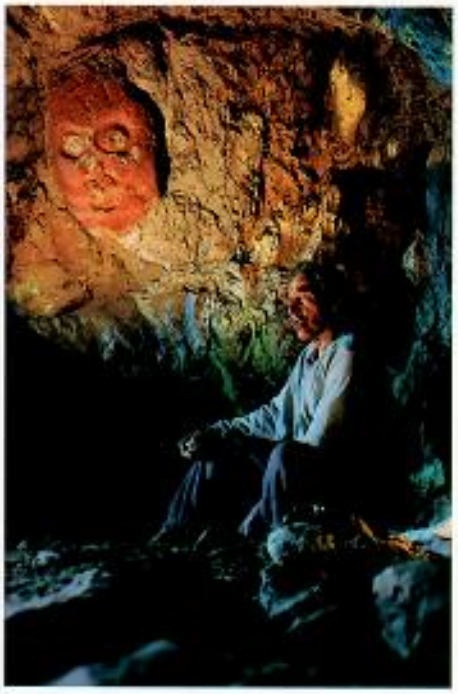
As I talked with the islanders, though, it turned out that they had their own version of events. "Thor knew I was a very good carver, and he came to see me," said one of them, a businessman now, in gold-rimmed glasses and a blue button-down shirt. "He asked me to take out of my cave all the ancient objects that I had there. I told him that I didn't have anything, but he insisted that I did."

I went away thinking about something another islander had said on the question of gullibility: "Thor Heyerdahl didn't trick the people here; they took advantage of what he wanted." They carved objects "to fit what he wanted to believe about the island."

Heyerdahl argues that he could distinguish between the fake carvings and the authentic ones.

But the same islander reminded me that the Rapa Nui have a 1,500-year-old civilization. They have adapted and endured through settlement, warfare, famine, cannibalism, slave raids, smallpox, leprosy, military rule, and now tourism. Their lives are testimony that there is still strength in the confines of the island, and that they remain ingenious enough to exploit its limited resources, however circumstances may change. They know who they are and where they live.

"We have our history," said one. "We have our culture. We speak the Polynesian language." He smiled benignly. "If you brought a South American Indian here, he would starve." □



Perched on Orongo's cliffs, a petroglyph (right) recalls the ancient birdman cult. Each year the island chief whose representative retrieved the first egg of the sooty tern from nearby Motu Nui was named birdman. Contenders waited in caves like this, where a painted image glares above islander Felipe Teao. "My grandfather used to come here," he says. "I come back to honor him."