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Peer reviewed

THÉO MILIN

Book Review: *Rapa Nui Theatre: Staging Indigenous Identities in Easter Island*

Abstract

Book review: Moira S. Fortin Cornejo, Rapa Nui Theatre: Staging Indigenous Identities in Easter Island, London and New York: Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 9781032277356, 226 pages, 33 black-and-white illustrations. Hardback \$170.00, Ebook \$52.95.

Keywords: Theatre, Rapa Nui, Easter Island, Polynesia, New Zealand, performance, arts, authenticity, tradition

Rapa Nui Theatre: Staging Indigenous Identities in Easter Island sets out to analyse and historicise theatrical phenomena on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) at the crossroads of dramaturgical studies, history, and “multi-sited” ethnographic research. Author Moira Fortin Cornejo’s overview is based on an extensive bibliography, interviews, ethnographic notes, photos, and a few diagrams. This diversity of material makes it possible to effectively flesh out this history. Fortin Cornejo’s many interviews with key members of the Rapanui community show the perspectives of the actors involved in theatrical and artistic production in Rapa Nui (and elsewhere), and the plurality of their approaches and positions.

The book follows a mainly thematic structure and is divided into “acts” and “scenes.” Act I presents the characteristics of theatre on Rapa Nui through an in-depth dialogue with other Polynesian performance traditions. It also introduces the theoretical framework that organises Rapa Nui theatre into three categories: “believed-in,” in which the “truthful” aspect of performance is more important than the aesthetic; “community,” a theatre that enables the sharing and collective creation of stories with the audience, aiming ultimately at participation in the political dialogue;¹ and “popular theatre,” characterised by its accessibility, both in terms of location and price. The collective function of theatre is emphasised on several occasions, notably with the use of the concept of *communitas*,² a term Fortin Cornejo borrows from anthropologist Victor Turner and applies to the collective formed by the actors and the audience, even speaking of “Pacific

communitas" (p. 27). "Through these popular performances," she writes, "indigenous communities connect, not only through kinship, language, and culture, but also through the shared experience of theatre" (p. 35).

Fortin Cornejo also discusses the tourist phenomenon, for its major impact on the way "culture is made and seen." Performances for tourists are often judged for their lack of authenticity and the way they are merchandised and staged. She underscores the primarily economic function of these performances (pp. 42–3) and the inevitable constructions and rearrangements of authenticity and tradition (pp. 60–1). The important thing, she says, is to continue to negotiate spaces of representation that are neither oriented towards the tourist market nor conditioned by its expectations; in short, to maintain a "backstage" with differentiated "accesses."

In fact, the dilemma of and search for authenticity run throughout the book. The author explores visions of "tradition" and "authenticity" on Rapa Nui, which are essential for understanding the link between identity, historical periods, and theatrical creation. Tradition, as a "fixed point in the past," can hardly be altered, and, as carver Benedicto Tuki Paté explains, the contemporary is often seen as a mockery of the ancients (p. 55). In a context where pre-colonial narratives are favoured as powerful tools for transmitting traditional stories and group identity, innovation can sometimes be difficult, for artists are stuck between fear of contamination and the vital need to create.³ In this setting, the book argues for more room for appropriation and novelty. It highlights, for example, the notable absence of recent and colonial history in theatrical performances—something that was not always the case in the past, as shown by the Miro O'One celebrations, which feature a pantomime of a Western maritime crew (p. 106).

Another of the salient points of the highly conceptual Act I is that it proposes a constant movement between Rapa Nui and New Zealand, a close dialogue that benefits from the author's intimate knowledge of both islands. One wonders whether the theoretical implications and presuppositions of a comparative approach might not have benefited from being made more explicit. This back-and-forth approach brings a highly fruitful decompartmentalisation to the analysis, a marked trend in recent work on Rapa Nui. The book emphasises the island's undeniable Polynesian identity, but also its limitations, particularly in terms of the effectiveness of contacts with the region. Fortin Cornejo explains that while cultural exchanges, in the form of performances at the other's home, are a common phenomenon, co-creation and close artistic collaboration are rarer (p. 27).

Act II goes into more detail about the local chronology of the theatrical event. Its first two scenes briefly summarise the history of Rapa Nui and the world. They begin with the first contacts, mentioning the dramatic and violent episodes of the slave trade expeditions in 1862, the importance of the introduction of Catholicism, and the abandonment of ancient beliefs and practices such as the *Taŋata Manu* ritual (pp. 67–8). This huge cultural loss during the nineteenth century explains the weight put on preservation and performance of the tradition today.

Fortin Cornejo gives a brief account of major events in Rapa Nui since annexation in 1888, characterised by the official government being first in private hands and then military hands. She looks at the government of the Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua (1903–53), and then that of the Chilean Navy (1953–65) up until the revolution of 1964, which brought access to civil rights to the Rapanui population. These are complex periods, involving violence, discrimination, economic exploitation, and isolation. But they also saw agency and a certain “domestication of colonial power” (p. 72), a concept used by Rapanui historian Cristián Moreno Pakarati to designate the game of alliance, negotiation, and balance of power that the island community established with the colonial structures. The author then turns to the modernisation of the island, a period that is often cited in the literature as beginning with the opening of Mataveru International Airport in 1967. This era is characterised by a sharp rise in tourism, the introduction of more intercultural education against a backdrop of a decline in the use of Indigenous language, and the creation of some recent initiatives promoting Rapanui culture such as the Tāpati Rapa Nui Festival, Mahana o Te Reo Festival, and the Toki School of Music.

The book’s third and final “act,” the denouement, is the most consequential and complex. It begins by proposing a genealogy of antecedents for theatrical expression, pointing out that while ancient ceremonies have been analysed in the past, the vitality and constant reconfiguration of the island’s ritual and festive sphere has been studied less. In the end, it is the elements of a Rapanui “festive being” that Fortin Cornejo foregrounds here in her exploration of celebrations and ritual forms. The *a’amu tuai*, the living repertoire of island dramaturgy, opens this section. The author makes an interesting comparison with Brecht’s epic theatre, which aims to deepen the audience’s knowledge and understanding through an epic rather than seeking emotions, by adopting an expository and narrative genre (pp. 84–6). The parallel is illuminating in terms of the structure of Rapanui stories, which often focus on facts and context rather than on individual feelings, as well

as on certain narrative practices—such as the use of an outside narrator—to weave the web of facts into a story.

Fortin Cornejo then focuses on *koro*, a pre-colonial festive form, and the historical matrix of *a'amu tuai*, a staged interpretation of a legend, story, or event from the past (often a mixture of all three). She reviews and describes its genre variations: *koro 'ei*, *koro paina*, and *narinari*. Material traces are rare, and testimonies are often indirect (e.g., Thomas S. Barthel and his informants). Nevertheless, the author's concern with finding various anthropologists' informants, and a review of secondary and photographic sources, leads us to believe that before contact, and later during colonisation, masked and performative traditions existed in the vicinity of the *ahu* (ceremonial platforms where the *moai* statues are often erected).⁴ The same elements are repeated in the various celebrations, past and present: the omnipresence of food and gifts, joint effort (*'ūmaŋa*), comedy, and transmission. Other celebrations are then mentioned, including the Tāpati Rapa Nui Festival. Highly dynamic and touristic, the festival is centred around an election of queens, which was gradually “rapanuised” from 1967 to the present day, with an acceleration in the 1980s. The book highlights Tāpati's role as an interface between the community and the outside world. This does not come without its problems: “Visitors often fail to understand the significant and longstanding family effort and work put into each contest that exists behind the festival” (p. 116). The “tourist gaze” thus generates misunderstandings, for example when the *a'amu tuai* is judged to be “boring,” as it is often performed only in *re'o rapa nui* (the vernacular). We could postulate that the closure of meaning is a deliberate mechanism for keeping the spectacle and commodification of the culture under control. The importance of the candidate for queen as the centripetal point of Tāpati's productive effort, also translated in terms of *'ūmaŋa*, can also be noted.

In Scene VII, Fortin Cornejo focuses on the Mata Tuu Hotu Iti group—central to the development of Rapanui theatre and to the reconstruction of Rapanui identity in the 1970s and 1980s—which gradually defined the traditional corpus and reaffirmed an ancestral identity (p. 128). The group produced profoundly immersive performances, combining locations, events, costumes, and audiences that would leave their mark on all future artistic creations. Mata Tuu Hotu Iti is subsequently regularly discussed in the book, as a point of departure, counterpoint, and reference.

Fortin Cornejo highlights the forms, actors, and founding periods of Rapanui theatre, leaving us with the content proper: the cultural and artistic practices. The book classifies artistic forms as “conceptual” (music and dance),

“physical” (costumes, sculpture, and stage spaces), “symbolic” (body painting and string figures), and “literary” (words and stories). These practices and their functions have been transmitted and circulated over time. Fortin Cornejo’s typology offers a comprehensive and intelligible overview, but also shows its limitations when the intimate interweaving of the different dimensions becomes apparent, destabilising the categories in a salutary way. For example, the *kai kai* string game is classified as symbolic, but relies on the physicality of the thread and the literary aspect of the recitations (or *pata’uta’u*).

Scene X, the final scene of the book, offers six examples of theatrical experiments between 1995 and 2021. It looks at their actors, their production process, and the course and consequences of each. In this way, it constitutes a very valuable and original documentary contribution to anthropological, historical, and cultural studies of the island. The six works described, created by Rapanui people or Chilean women living on the island (including Fortin Cornejo), reveal different ways of appropriating and portraying Rapanui tradition and cultural codes. Above all, they offer a glimpse of the place of theatre in Rapa Nui in today’s society, through and beyond Tāpati (p. 171). Sometimes the narrative of a performance is adorned with a staging that departs from the Mata Tuu Hotu Iti canons, or adopts a specific medium, like the puppets in the play *Ka Ori kavakava. Nuku Te Maño: Articulated Sculptures* (2001), created, written, composed, and directed by Sofia Abarca Fariña. At other times, it is the story that is new, while still constantly drawing on local history, as in *Honu Ure Mea Mea* (2009), directed by Ema Pakomio, Petero Huke, and Moira Fortin. The “grammar” of Rapa Nui theatre emerges here in the background, in particular the importance of the transmission of the story, the generational sequence, the educational and memorial significance, and finally the omnipresence (even figurative) of the great visual and symbolic repertoire of the island.

All this leads the author to affirm, in a short conclusion in the form of an epilogue, the continuing existence and singularity of Rapa Nui theatre. It aims, she says, “to depict customs, values, stories and life experiences that are believed to represent the behaviour and morals of pre-colonial Rapa Nui society, thus linking the notion of cultural past with cultural performance in the present” (p. 194). But the mixture of influences is also characteristic of the latter and marks out a “road in search of identity.” Ultimately, the book proposes a profoundly multi-sited approach, through its transdisciplinarity and mixed methodology, and through the spaces and historical periods mobilised for the analysis. It provides an interesting vector for approaching the relations between the island and the rest of Polynesia,

as well as tourism and the Chilean nation-state. On this last point, we might wonder what places Chilean national celebrations (such as those observed annually on May 21 and September 9 and 18), the latter of which do not feature much in the book, occupy in the theatrical and festive repertoire described. Do the dynamics around authenticity, educational objectives, and transmission via the epic—identified for the other celebrations—play out in the same way in these “celebrations of the nation”?

Théo Milin has a master's degree in political science from Sciences Po Rennes (France) and a doctorate in anthropology/social sciences from Rennes 2 University and the Universidad de Chile. He studies festive and ritual systems on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and in the Atacama Desert (northern Chile), paying particular attention to the constructions of identities that these systems involve and their historical transformations.

Notes

¹ The mention of community theatre is a welcome opportunity for the author to define the perimeter and uses of the term “community,” a term that is very present and much debated on the island (p. 26).

² It would seem that while the companionship and shared experience aspect of the concept serves the author's purpose, other aspects covered by the original concept are more difficult to incorporate into the proposed analysis, such as the symmetry and equality of objective conditions, and the sharing of a temporary liminality.

³ These traditional stories and the sources for each of them are listed in the bibliography on p. 198.

⁴ I differentiate between “contact” and subsequent “colonisation.” The term “contact” is used here to refer to the period from 1777, when European ships landed on the island—a period marked by exchanges and violent episodes, such as the terrible slavery expeditions of 1862, but during which no permanent settlement took place. The first permanent Western settlements and colonisation ventures did not appear until 1864, with the missionary Brother Eugène Eyraud, and mariner Jean-Baptiste Dutrou-Bornier following in 1868.