

The collapse of the easter island civilization essay sample



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Introduction

Historical Overview of Eater Island

Easter Islands, also known also as the *Rapa Nui* or *Isla de Pascua* , is located over 2000 miles from the coastlines of Chile, which is in the southern portions of Pacific ocean. The island is basically a triangularly shaped island with geographical measurement of fifteen miles from its base and less than eight across its widest point[1]. The Easter Island is considered a Polynesian island from the Southern Pacific region. In addition, the geographical characteristic of Easter Island is mainly the presence of vast extinct volcanoes within the area. With the tragic geographical characteristics of the Easter Islands, its inhabitants have encountered tremendous events of famines, epidemics, civil wars, slave raids and colonialism.

Prior to Easter island's discovery, the place was considered as a myth by ancients. The discovery of Easter Island was due to the Dutch admiral and his crew. Such discovery of Easter Island took place during the Sunday of 1722 by three Dutch sailing vessels who were supposed to be in search for another island[2]. During the time of their discovery, the sailing crew noticed mix races[3] settling in the specific portion of the Island. The fair-skinned tribes of Easter Island wore large discs in their artificially extended earlobes and displayed solemn reverence for the statues. The people coexisting in the area were branded as the Rapa Nui people and part of their cultural heritage was the monumental statues or *Moai* .

These statues became their major trademark among their discoverers due to their intensive passion over spirituality. In addition, considering the extreme

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distance from the mainland, the indigenous tribes of Easter Island obtain their needs from sparse natural resources that usually consist mainly of a few dozen types of botanical resources, different insects and small reptiles. In the consideration to the racial origin of the Island's inhabitants, the first settlers considered were from Hawaii during 300 to 400 B. C. From here onwards, the race encountered different blends from Polynesians specifically. According to Thor Heyerdahl[4], there were two different types of settlers who settled to the Island: first was the *Hanau epe* or long-ears that had the cultural characteristics of genuine Polynesians, while the second was the *Hanau momoko* or short-eared settlers that were thought to be from Pacific [5].

Discussion

Struggle for Survival

During the time of the Island's discovery, there were already an approximated three thousand Polynesian originated individuals living in the Island, while the Hanau momoko summed to an approximate of eight thousand. By the time of Dutch and European arrival, the island and its inhabitants were on extreme resource crisis and poverty. The family lived in cages or reed huts that had no wood foundations. In addition, the island did not possess any means of water transportation that further worsen the situation in the area. After the initial discovery of Dutch in 1720s, the civilization was not anymore visited until 1770s by the Spanish sailors[6]. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the human population declined on Easter Islands[7] due to internal causes; however, there were

also pointed causes of decline that originated to external means, such as the forced slave gathering of European and American ships.

The ecosystems present in the area vast fields of grasslands and rocks. Easter Island did not possess rich natural resources, which eventually resulted to massive scarcity of resources. The worst part of their natural condition was the absence of trees that resulted to frequent incidences of erosions and drying of the soil. The increase of population within the area eventually led to the dire need of intensive tilling of land, which consequently involved the clearing of palm trees[8]. Crop production also declined in the area, which eventually caused the decrease on their food supply[9]. During this situation, the tribes were able to conceptualize the use of pal trees in building canoes for fishing purposes; however, the shortage of food became more tragic and eventually led to the collapse of food sources.

The biological collapse of the civilization's ecology was brought by the over-consumption of natural resources. The availability of food did not anymore suffice to the needs of the overgrown population; hence, the situation triggered disputes and barbarism. The food competition between tribes of the Island ignited the start of bloody far between the two tribes for the sake of survival[10]. In addition, cannibalism developed as a product of the tensions occurring in the Island. As a response to food crisis, the captives of each tribe were cannibalized causing the increase of tension of wars between the two tribes as well[11]. While war intensified, the huts of each tribe caught were burnt and their fields were plundered. Moreover, the famine on food continued to suffocate and diminish the number of every

tribe members. According to Fischer, the islanders utilized a sharp tool called *mata'a* in order to cut through the flesh of their enemies[12].

Cannibalism became an immense need for the tribes to survive since the food shortage had already gained its massive infliction among the islanders. However, according to Fischer, the issues on cannibalism was not mainly archeologically based, but rather narrative. Fischer mentioned that those caught in the wars between the tribes of *Hanau epe* and *Hanau momoko* were turned into *kio* or slaves. Due to the vast chaos that occurred in their civilization, the population declined among tribes. In addition to the cause of population decrease, Spence and Tice mentioned that the women were the primary targets of the war and the slave harboring of Europeans and American foreigners[13].

The Collapse

During the visit of the Dutch explorer 1772, Jacob Roggeveen, he was able to witness the intensive decline of living in Easter Island. The natives' population declined to an approximate of a hundred (as mentioned from the accounts of Roggeveen). In 1774, during the visit of a Spanish captain, James Cook, he was able to discover the vast misery and poverty present within the area. At the point, the islanders possessed firearms for battle, while the previous agricultural sources and plantations had been abandoned. The collapse of the Easter civilization was brought by the advancing tides of food crisis, which eventually led to the heightening of competition. The scarcity paved the way that led to the disputes between the two tribes, *Hanau epe* and *Hanau momoko* . Such condition created an unsafe atmosphere for

every inhabitant, while barbaric acts (e. g. cannibalism) had also become the primary alternative to satisfy the needs of their tribes.

Conclusion

The Easter island located at Chiles in the Southern portion of the Pacific had long existed but was discovered by the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen only in 1772. The collapse of the country was rooted due to the overpopulation that started by 1500s. Excess biological consumption and ecological depletion became the roots of the decline, which eventually led to intense food scarcity. In addition, the scarcity ignited wars between the tribes of *Hanau epe* and *Hanau momoko* due to widely recognized food competition. However, this did not suffice their need; hence, with the efforts of surviving, they resorted to barbaric practice, such as Barbarism, which further declined the population and clashed the civilization of Easter Island.

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[1] Schoch, R. M. and McKinney, M., *Case Studies in Environmental Science* (Jones & Bartlett Publishers, 1996) p. 5

[2] Olsen, B. *Sacred Places Around the World: 108 Destinations* (CCC Publishing, 2002) p. 151

[3] The characteristics involve brownish hue, darker than the Spaniards, and others with white skin and red hair. Different ethnic groups were clearly coexisting on Easter Island (Ibid, p. 151).

[4] A well known-anthropologist that obtained the information from Pedro Atan, an eleventh generation descendant of Ororonia: “ There were handsome people among our ancestors. There were two kinds of people on this island: some were dark (Polynesian) and some were quite fair skinned like you from the mainland, and with light hair. Real white people. But they were genuine Easter Islanders... the fair type, who were called oho-tea, or the light-haired...” (Fischer, S. R., *Rongorongo: The Easter Island Script : History, Traditions, Texts* (Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 88)

[5] The physical characteristics of Hanau epe, such as red hair and fair skin, were more patterned to the traditional Polynesian settlers. Meanwhile, Hanau momoko was considered as the brownish race with darker hair (Ibid, p. 88).

[6] Schoch and McKinney, p. 5

[7] By 1500, the estimated population of the inhabitants summed to 15, 000. If a party of ten people originally settled on Easter Island and grew at a relatively modest 1% annually, the number of Easter Islanders would double about every seventy years. However, this prediction was declined right after the discovery of the inhabitants' population in 1720s. The growing population resulted to further increased demands on food and resources, which eventually caused the resource scarcity. By 1720s, the population went down to an approximate of 12, 000, and by the early 1880s, the population declined to a total of 111 individuals from both tribes (Nersesian, R. L. *Energy for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Guide to Conventional and Alternative Sources* (M. E. Sharpe 2006) p. 2).

[8] The condition of the soil and the rocky terrain of the island were more suited to the growing of palm trees. Hence, it was the palm trees that maintain the viability of the soil; however, due to the increasing need of the growing population, the clearing of the trees became necessary to provide these inhabitants space and more land to till for food production (Ibid. p. 2-3).

[9] Schoch and McKinney, p. 5

[10] Davie, M. R., *The Evolution of War: A Study of Its Role in Early Societies* (Courier Dover Publications, 2004) p. 263

[11] Nunn, P. D. *Climate, Environment, and Society in the Pacific During the Last Millennium* (Elsevier Publishing, 2007) p. 151

[12] Mata'a is a sharp object made from volcanic rock shards. It is usually used by the natives to make their spears or daggers. In 1770, Spanish accounts who traveled to the consorts of the Island found several grotesque mata'a wounds among islanders (Fischer, S. *Island at the End of the World: The Turbulent History of Easter Island* (Reaktion Books, 2005) p. 55)

[13] Spence, L. and Tice, P. *The Problem of Lemuria: The Sunken Continent of the Pacific* (Book Tree, 2002)