Lost Cultures: Living Legacies

**Episode Title:** The Rapa Nui: The Actual Name of Easter Island and its People

**Episode Summary:**
You’ve likely heard of “Easter Island” and the giant stone statues that famously reside there, confounding people who can’t understand how people could have made and moved them so long in the past. But did you know that the island and the people that live here are actually called Rapa Nui? Or that the artistry and engineering of those statues are a key reason that the people there were able to survive on such a remote island with limited resources? Filmmaker and member of the Rapa Nui community Sergio Mata’u Rapu and Professor Carl Lipo share the history and culture of the Rapa Nui and how the people living there today – or in the far flung diaspora – still rely on the lessons of their ancestors today.

**Episode Type:** Full
**Episode Rating:** Clean
**Season Number:** 1
**Episode Number:** 7

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**Part 1: Cold Open.**

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** There’s a point on Rapa Nui, it’s the tallest mountain you can go to the very top, and you can look 360 degrees and just see ocean. And it’s at that point that you can see sort of the limits of your island, right? You can see the limits of your world, your solid world. But my ancestors saw the ocean as super highways, right? And so then the world was beyond just the land mass. They would move to other land masses, to other islands for resources to grow your community, to trade with other communities. And what makes Rapa Nui, I guess, unique within Polynesia is that we made these moai statues. That's what essentially people know our island from. But the tradition of worshiping ancestors or your elders is not unique to Rapa Nui. You can find it throughout Polynesia. We just kind of went to the extreme a little bit and made them big, and they had faces, and eyes, and big bellies. These massive statues were transported without the use of a wheel, without metals, no ancient aliens coming in, and, like, helping us with a tractor beam, you know? Essentially through very simple ropes and the power
of community is how they were moved. Then there's contact with the West. An early Dutch explorer, 1722, “rediscovers,” I'll say, Rapa Nui. It's on Easter Sunday. So he's like, "Hey, we'll call it Easter Island." And then the name kind of sticks, but our community was thriving, and creating, prior to his arrival. And continued to do so way after. B that thread of understanding of where we come from, and what's important, our priorities are still there. We just don't wear loincloths anymore. We've sort of traded those out for blue jeans 'cause maybe they're a little bit more practical now. (laughs) My name is Sergio Mata'u Rapu. I am a documentary filmmaker from Rapa Nui.

Alisha Prakash (Host): “Rapu Nui” is both the name of a place and a people.

Music: Lost Cultures theme begins as bed and continues under Narrator.

Alisha Prakash (Host): And while the place may be known to many as “Easter Island,” the history of its people and culture stretches back long before that Dutch explorer “rediscovered” it. Welcome to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies… a podcast from Travel + Leisure. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash.

=== Part 2: Series & Episode Intro. ===

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up from bed to full volume, then back down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): What can we learn about a place by delving into the people who once lived there? In what ways do cultures build upon each other as populations come and go? How do they complement each other, interact, and leave their marks on the people that come after them? And are cultures truly ever lost, even if the people move on?

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades back up to a climax, then ends. After a beat, incidental music fades in as bed, then continues under Narrator.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Rapa Nui exists as one of the most remote inhabited islands in the world. If you were to think of a triangle whose corners were in Chile, Hawaii, and New Zealand, Rapa Nui would fall somewhere in the middle, though a bit more toward that Chilean corner. In fact, these days (and for the last 135 years), Chile has claimed Rapa Nui as a special territory – though there are certainly some who still dispute the treaty that made this otherwise official. And if you’ve listened to other episodes of this podcast, you probably have some idea about how contact between the Rapa Nui people and the outside world may have gone, from that
Dutch explorer and on. But of course every culture and its history is unique – both before and after historical contact with other cultures.

**Music: Incidental music changes then continues under the start of Part 3.**

---**Part 3: Our Story Guides.***---

**Alisha Prakash (Host)** …and to help us *tell* the story of the Rapa Nui, we have two guides. First is Sergio Rapu, who we heard from at the start of the episode…

**Music: Incidental music continues, then fades out under guest.**

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** I’m indigenous Rapa Nui, from my dad’s side, and we trace our lineage all the way back to the early statue carvers. People know about Easter Island or Rapa Nui because of the stone statues, and we call those moai. They’re representations of our ancestors, and so my ancestors carved those statues a long, long time ago. They were, and continue to be just sort of ever present around our community. The way that my culture has interacted with them has changed over the years, I would say, but nevertheless, the meaning stays the same. We, as Rapa Nui, are known as an ancestor cult. We revere, we worship our elders, our ancestors, I would say maybe even more so than gods, in a sense. You go to other cultures and communities, and it's about either a single God, or multiple gods. Our culture teaches us that we learn from and respect those elders, and so that's the significance of the moai, that is why the moai were built, that's why they were placed in front of our villages in ancient times. That, I think, is generally how most Rapa Nui recognize them. When we’re out in the field, whether we’re guiding tourists through a sacred site, or going to the beach with our own families, there’s this sense of utmost respect that is required for who our ancestors were and what they did.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Also guiding us in this episode is Carl Lipo, a professor of anthropology at Binghamton University in Upstate New York…

**Carl Lipo:** I’m an archeologist who studies Easter Island and has been doing so for about 20-something years. It goes way back for me. I’ve always been interested in the fact that people in the past did really remarkable things that are really a mystery and a puzzle to us as westerners. This started, for me, as a kid looking at some of the Native American mounds that were built around Madison, Wisconsin where I grew up. They always puzzled me. Like, “Why would people have spent time making these earthen mounds that look like animals? What was it that led people to do those kinds of things?”

And of course, as I learned more about the world, I saw that there were other achievements that people did in the past, whether that’s Stonehenge, the pyramids, giant walls, temples, all kinds of stuff all over the place. And, and the one place in the world that puzzled me the most
was Easter Island and Rapa Nui, as it's known. I had seen a Leonard Nimoy show called 'In Search Of' that was popular in the '70s as a kid. And in that show, Nimoy talks about this island in the remote part of the Pacific thousands of miles from anything else, really isolated from the rest of the world, where people had made hundreds of gigantic statues. And so when I got to be a professor, I thought, "That's the place. I really wanna go study that particular question because it seemed like the ultimate example of this remarkable behavior that people had in the past."

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Before we get into the wider history of the Rapa Nui people, let's hear a bit more from Sergio Rapu about what it was like growing up there in more recent years…

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** I was born on Rapa Nui while there was very little contact, but there was some contact, 'cause my mom is American. At the time – this was in the early 1980s – we had maybe one flight every two weeks. And I can't remember if it was just to Santiago, Chile, or there were also these flights to Papeete in Tahiti. But basically, Rapa Nui, or Easter Island, as most people know it, is in between Tahiti and Chile, just kind of a speck out in the middle of the ocean. Hanga Roa is the main town, and that's really where everybody lived. The streets were dirt, there were very few cars. Primary mode of transportation was walking, and then secondary, horseback ride and a couple of cars on the island. It was simple, you know, it was nice. It was very safe. And I think that kind of also speaks to the community at the time. Because the majority of people there, were indigenous Rapa Nui, we were all related. I mean, we still are sort of all related, in a sense. And so if my dad isn't watching over me, if mom's not watching over me, it's my grandmother, it's my aunt, it's my aunt's cousins, whatever. We all have responsibility for our community. Food and community gatherings were and continue to be really important to our culture. We gather around food. We gather around celebrations of births, and deaths, and everything in between, so, looking back, it was a really wonderful time, but I think also for my parents, it was a very stressful time. It was a time when there weren't, compared to today, a lot of comforts of the modern world – medicine being one of them. When my mom was still pregnant with my sister she started having contractions, but early on, before she was due. I remember her telling me the story where, all of a sudden, her, and my dad, and grandmother, they were all sort of rushing into this one little car that our family had, bumping along the dirt road to the hospital as she's having contractions. And then she hears the airplane take off. And that's sort of a marking of, "Okay, now we have to hold it down for two weeks until the next airplane comes, 'cause there's no other quick way of getting off the island."

**Music: Incidental music begins as bed.**

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** But that also reminded me about the airplane landing and taking off is a marker of time. Back then, every two weeks, you would hear this loud roar as the airplane lands, and the whole community would sort of go to the airport to welcome visitors that are coming off, to receive goods, and presents and things that were coming. And prior to the pandemic, the amount of airplanes that started coming was just massive. So, pre-pandemic, we
were having about two to three flights a day. And so then that marker, all of a sudden, is not just a two-week marker, it's like, "Okay, here's the morning flight, here's the afternoon flight. When's tomorrow's flight coming? Is it delayed? Does it impact the other flights?" the sharing and communication with the outside world is black and white compared to what it used to be when I was growing up there.

**Music: incidental music fades up to a dramatic pitch as we head into Part 4.**


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**--- Part 4: Looking Back. ---**

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**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Now let’s go back further… We asked Sergio Rapu to describe his people from a historical perspective…

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** If I were to describe the Rapa Nui culture to somebody, I would say that we come from an ancient group of people that lived in the Pacific Ocean. When you look at a map of the world, you see all these land masses, all these big continents, right? North America, South America, Africa, all that, but people don't see the Pacific Ocean as, in a sense, where people would live. Typically, a map cuts the Pacific Ocean in half, and our continent, our world for Polynesians is that Pacific Ocean. There are thousands of islands in that big, blue space that was home to my ancestors. And so I would start there, because I think what makes Rapa Nui unique is what makes islanders unique.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** According to Sergio Rapu, oral tradition suggests that the Pacific Islanders who first arrived on Rapa Nui may have come from a place called "Hiva." And according to some interpretations, “Hiva” may be the island now known as Mangareva, 1400 nautical miles to the west. We asked Carl Lipo to lay out more of the early history.

**Carl Lipo:** Well this is a narrative that's been built up by archeologists and native people over quite a long period of time. We're learning more about the history of Rapa Nui. It's something that we're actively uncovering and putting together. So it's a dynamic story. But what we do know – what we think we know at this point – is that people got to this remote island in the easternmost part of Polynesia about 1200 AD, about 800 years ago. This was part of an expansion of people out of central Polynesia people who sailed canoes and found all the remote corners of Polynesia in about the same period of time, people who ultimately moved from Tahiti, sort of the central Polynesia, out to the remote parts of Hawaii, the Marquesas, Austral Islands, New Zealand, and ultimately Rapa Nui. As they expanded across and found all these different islands, they’re, you know, obviously fishermen. You know, people who gathered marine resources, but also farmers. They farmed taro in some islands, sweet potato particularly...
in Rapa Nui and some other islands. They were expert stone crafters, expert sailors. People really adapted to living in Polynesian islands. When they got to this island, it's a small, remote island, that was at the time covered with sort of a mixed forest, lots of palm trees, seabirds, maybe some land birds. And they established a colony there and transformed this island with Polynesian traditions in terms of cultivating food, clearing forests into a sustainable society and people still live there, still Rapa Nui people living on this island who’ve successfully been able to manage life on this island up until the present.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Missionaries who came to the island later recorded oral traditions that described a society with a class system where, at the top, was a high chief called an “ariki.” The high chiefs were said to all have been of the clan descended from the island's founder, Hotu Matu’a, and sat above the chiefs of nine other clans on the island. And for around 500 years, from the time of Polynesian settlement, the people of Rapa Nui existed and developed their culture in relative isolation, before the arrival of the first known Europeans to set foot there…

Carl Lipo: The island obviously has been deeply impacted by European arrival. When Europeans first get there in 1722, it's pretty clear they introduced diseases, and diseases have a huge impact on the population. There's lots of death and demographic changes as a result of disease.

Alisha Prakash (Host): 1722 is when Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen arrived, with later hearsay reports claiming there may have been around 3000 Rapa Nui at this time, though about a dozen died as a result of Roggeveen’s visit. Spanish ships then arrived in 1770, followed in 1774 by an expedition led by James Cook, the British explorer that we also discussed a couple of episodes back when we covered the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. And unfortunately, in addition to disease and other disruptions brought by Europeans, in the 1860s the Rapa Nui were also the victims of raids by Peruvian slavers who kidnapped about half of their population. While the Peruvians were eventually forced to return the Rapa Nui they’d kidnapped, it came at a price as smallpox was also brought back and killed about a quarter of the island’s inhabitants. However, as Carl Lipo explains, through all this adversity, the Rapa Nui still managed to hold onto their way of life…

Carl Lipo: Let's just put it this way: In 1722, when Europeans first arrive on the island, it's pretty clear that the native people were continuing to make statues and that this society was very sustainable. And the activities of making statues were embedded in the culture and the way in which people lived their daily lives. And in fact, our research points out to the fact that statue construction, these moai that were built there, are integral to the success of living on this island through the community efforts that bring people together to make them and move them. Europeans come in a series of waves that sequentially introduce different kinds of diseases and effects on the island. There's impacts to the population as a result of disease and demographic change, and there's a lot of economic changes that occur as a result. Items that you couldn’t possibly get, Europeans would’ve brought – things like clothing, metal materials, stuff like that. The society changes quite a bit in terms of the incentives and the things that people were trying to do. There’s a lot of economic and social upheaval. But people continued to make statues. It's sort of remarkable that there's a cultural resilience; statue construction and daily
lives continue even though there's all these changes going on. Populations get down to 111 as a result of slave raiding and disease in 1877. So it's unbelievable changes. What's remarkable is that despite the fact that populations got so low, there's a credible adherence in maintenance of cultural traditions. The language, songs, oral stories and traditions are maintained by the people who survived that sort of bottleneck of the population.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Let's pause and back up just a little, though, to talk about the importance of sheep to the history of Rapa Nui...

Carl Lipo: There's a particular character who comes in and starts to take over, sort of claim the island and buys up the land.

Alisha Prakash (Host): That character is Jean-Baptiste Dutrou-Bornier, a Frenchman who first arrived on Rapa Nui in 1866 while transporting two missionaries. He came and went from the island a couple of times before eventually returning to live on the island in 1868. Dutrou-Bornier eventually bought up the island with the intention of completely removing all the Rapa Nui people to make room for his sheep farm. And while he did not remove all the people, the population suffered tremendously, with many being moved to Tahiti while others who remained were subject to violence, destruction of their homes, or kidnappings. It’s during his tenure, and while he claimed the false title of “governor”, that the population fell to 111. He was killed in 1876, ostensibly in a dispute over a dress, though it’s thought that the killing may have actually been in retaliation for his kidnapping of young women. A dozen years later, in 1888, Chile annexed the island and the sheep farming eventually fell to the Williamson-Balfour Company, a Chilean subsidiary of a Scottish company.

Carl Lipo: A license is given to a Scottish sheep ranching company, the Williamson-Balfour Company, to run a sheep ranch using the labor of the islanders on the island. Most of the island is given over to the sheep ranch. People who live on the island are forced off their land, placed into the town of Hanga Roa with a wall that was put around it and allowed only on to the rest of the island to work on that sheep ranch in this sort of really tragic history of the use of the landscape.

Sergio Mata’u Rapu: Prior to that, we had a clan system where different clans would live in different parts of the island, and they would have territories and things like that. Not anymore. We all live in sort of the same world. And on top of that, we need to ask for permission to go back out into our territories all because of, "Let's protect the sheep." I'm not necessarily throwing shade at the Williamson-Balfour Company, because my grandfather was a sheep shearer for the Williamson-Balfour Company, right? And, you know, they paid the Rapa Nui, and they helped introduce certain things like flour, and sugar, and oil, and all these things. I would say it's one of the first big industries in Rapa Nui, but it also caused the Rapa Nui to, I would say, not be as connected to the rest of the island. I mean, the Rapa Nui could get a pass to go out, and for fishing, all these things. But all of a sudden, we weren't living day in, day out in front of our moai, or at least in front of Rano Raraku, which is the one central place on the island where all the moai were made. That was sheep territory. This kind of blows my mind a little bit, too,
when I think about it, because my dad, growing up on Rapa Nui, he didn't have as much access to the rest of the island as I do today, as tourists do today, and so how can you sort of maintain that relationship between these incredibly important statues and these sacred sites if you're not by them all the time? It's a really interesting point in Rapa Nui's history, for good or for bad. The thing about history, like culture, is that it sort of affects everything in front of it, so you can't ever really say, "Well, that shouldn't have happened," or, "We're worse because of it," because it is just part of who we are today. My dad, as the good anthropologist, archeologist that he is, he likes to remind me that culture is ever-changing. There's not one point in time that you can point to and say, "This is the Rapa Nui culture. This is what it means to be a Rapa Nui person," because if you do that, you invalidate this whole other timeline that is our culture, and that's dangerous to do for multiple reasons. But the Rapa Nui today are as Rapa Nui as we were when we were building those statues.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** According to Carl Lipo, sheep ranching continued into the 1960s, until the Chilean Navy fully took the island over and it ultimately became a national park.

**Carl Lipo:** So if you go there today, most of the island is given over to park land, with populations living in town, which on the downside, native people have been restricted in terms of their access to their own island, which is terrible. On the plus side is that there is a large chunk of the island that is relatively undeveloped, and that when you go visit, from an archeological perspective, there's just an incredible array of things that reflect the past, in the park because it hasn't been developed in a modern sense. So it's an interesting landscape in the sense of you've got those deep historical effects that are tragic, but then this incredible resource that's reflective of that tragedy that's preserved in the archeological record. So as a result, people on the island still speak Rapa Nui. They still have Rapa Nui songs. They have Rapa Nui traditions. It's been deeply impacted by the effects of Europeans, but the strength of this culture itself is remarkable. That with that just that few number of people, they're able to continue with their traditions, and when you go to the island, there's at least 5,000 Rapa Nui people still speaking Rapa Nui, Spanish as well, plus a whole bunch of international languages with this really thriving culture that's just spectacular.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Let's return now to the moai, the enormous statues that most people think of when they encounter a reference to “Easter Island.” While they may be remarkable for their size, the importance of these statues goes far beyond their impressive bulk. Wrapped up in these monuments are feats of artistic expression and engineering that connect the Rapa Nui to their forebears and may just be the key to how they managed to survive as a people…

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** I should say, “moai” is the name that we use today to identify these statues. But in our culture, in our language, their name is “Aringa Ora ote Tupuna,” which translates to "the living face of our ancestors."

**Carl Lipo:** The archeological remains are really mind-blowing. What people were able to do with limited resources is really truly astonishing. The statues that they made, the famous moai, are carved out of cliff faces, lowered down off of cliff faces, and then moved several miles across
this island. And they're not only engineering achievements, they're really spectacular in terms of the artistic dimensions to them. The way in which they're formed and the faces are iconic. Everyone in the world knows Easter Island statue. That's sort of the classic Polynesian feature that everyone knows.

So one thing to remember is that they're all full statues. Some people talk about them as heads, and that comes from... Well, one, it's the cartoon. You see a lot of cartoons with just the heads. And those are actually usually derived from photos of statues that are at the quarry in which the full body is buried beneath the ground. All you see is the head. All the statues have full bodies - moai are full figures. It's hard to believe how big they are until you actually go there. You see a photo of them and you think, "Oh yeah, a big statue made out of stone. We've seen that before." But when you go to the island, you get blown away by the fact that these things are as big as three-story buildings. They're 30 feet high. I mean, they're just these towering figures that weigh 50 to 70 tons! And when you go there, you find out that there's actually nearly a thousand statues that have been carved or at different stages of carving around the island. About 600 at the quarry, one spot where most of the statues would be carved, and then about 400 that have been moved out of the quarry that you find at different platforms called ahus, these specially-made architectural structures that were built to put the statues on top of.

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** In ancient times, the Rapa Nui lived in front of, worshiped openly in front of, had ceremonies in front of these ahu platforms where the moai would stand.

**Carl Lipo:** there's an amazing number of these gigantic things, and they're all over the island. So the question Europeans have asked - over the years has been, “Well, how did they get them there? How do you move a three-story building that's made out of stone from this quarry that's in one corner of the island all the way across the island, across this volcanic landscape, to the other side? How is that possible?” Of course, there's been a lot of speculation about that. Europeans sometimes thought, "Well, other people did it. It wasn't the Rapa Nui people. It was somebody else who was there on the island beforehand that were killed off." Or space aliens, you know, for sort of the ultimate racist perspective where you say, "Well, it couldn't be those people. It must've been some intelligent beings from another planet." Really the least imaginative answer.

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** There's always a sense of mystery when it comes to Rapa Nui but the mystery around my island, the mystery around Rapa Nui really has to do with the way that knowledge was passed on. In Polynesia, the way that we pass on our stories, our traditions, all that is orally, right? This is why elders are also very important. You'll learn what you'll learn, because you listen to your grandmother, your grandfather, your uncles, all of them. If this chain of oral histories is ever cut or reduced, there isn't necessarily a textbook or anything that you can go back to. This is kind of what’s interesting when you think about the written language in European cultures, is that, well, you can go back and see what did Aristotle write, what did all these other famous people write about. We don't have that luxury in the Pacific. And so when Western colonizers started coming in, when there was a period of slave trading, too, that
happened where slave ships would come into the Pacific and would kidnap people. And then, of course, along with that is disease coming into the islands. And so people started dying in huge numbers. And what ends up happening is that incredibly important oral history chain starts breaking apart. And so, we have very little remains of our oral history that go back pretty far. That's why there's misunderstandings about, "What are the statues? Where do they come from? Who made them? Are the Rapa Nui still around? What happened to them?" I think what it comes down to is, there's a general misunderstanding of my culture because I think people are lured by this sense of mystery. It's like, "Oh, my God, we're gonna go to this mysterious island where nobody lives, and there's these giant statues, and we're gonna resolve the mystery." And so, yes, we have very little oral history to lean on. And I think there's a lot of really great scientific work that is being done, or has been done, by both indigenous Rapa Nui and Western scientists. They're helping to piece it all back together, but I learned from my dad ... and this was, I think, really important to his work... you can't really validate the scientific work that you're doing unless it's reflected in the oral history, unless it's reflected in the culture. 'Cause then you're just throwing darts, and you're making assumptions about things. For a really long time, people thought, "Oh, well, there was massive deforestation on the island, and so it must be connected to the statue-building. "People must have cut down these big trees and used them as rollers to transport these statues, right? Why not? That's how we do it in the West. We use wheels. They must have done it there." And now, we understand that that's not the case, because the biggest statues are still being transported after all the trees went away. And so here's sort of an example of: you can't necessarily just take your understanding of the world from the West, and then implant it into thinking, "Oh, this is how they must have done it." You really have to kind of start from within the culture.

**Carl Lipo:** What we do know is they were made and carved by Rapa Nui people, and that they used their incredible engineering skills in order to do that. There's been some speculation that the statues were moved using log rollers, that you would use some kinda wooden contraption to move the statues. The challenge there is the fact that the palm trees that were dominant on the island aren't particularly good for rolling anything. They're not strong. They're not like hardwood trees. Palm trees are a form of grass, so they have sort of a squishy interior and they crush easily. When we look at the roads, the features in which statues are moved across aren't really conducive to using log rollers or some kind of log contraption. Our own research started when we were looking at the statues, looking across the paths where they were moved, and we realized that there really wasn't any evidence for log contraptions being used at all. In the past in the 19th century, when Europeans had asked them, "Well, how did you move the statues?" Rapa Nui people said, "Well, they walked." And, you know, of course, Europeans at the time were like, "Oh, that's just the story that someone said. Sure, they walked. Well, how did you really move them?" You know? But in fact, from the archeological research we've been doing, we found that the only way they could have moved them was actually in a standing position…

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** It's not only archeological research that tells us the moai were moved while positioned upright, though…
Sergio Mata’u Rapu: So the way that we understand it is that my ancestors moved these statues essentially like how you would move a refrigerator—a little bit more elegantly than a refrigerator, but nonetheless. And the way that you stay in sync, the way that you coordinate people on ropes to move left, and right, and left and right is through a beat. Our oral history tells us that there was always one old lady who would be in charge of the singing in the work of transporting the statues. And then there’s this one oral history that talks about, you know, there were a group of people, they were having this really big feast, lobsters and all this stuff. And they didn't save anything for the old woman. And so in response, the old woman made the statues follow her. And so this is the oral history that sort of explains that statues fell over, and they broke and everything. But if you think about it, it's true. If you don't have a beat, if you don’t have a song to bring everybody together, it's hard to coordinate, it's hard to work together as a community to do anything, right? You have to have these shared values, the shared understanding, the shared art form.

Carl Lipo: It's an amazing story. It's hard to believe. You think like, ”Really? You'd move a three-story building in a standing position?” But the physics of it turn out to be the most efficient way to do it by basically tilting the statues to the side, because of the way it's formed, it actually takes steps forward. The statues were carved in such a way so that they could be moved in a walking position. When you look at the details of the statues themselves, and going to the island, of course, is the best way to do that. You can realize that the evidence about how they are moved is really there. You can really see it when you look at those bases, the bottom ends of the statue. They moved them in the most ingenious way, and they did it in such a way that required cooperation. It didn't require huge numbers of people and it didn't require a lot of resources, which they wouldn't have had. They were able to do it with their engineering prowess.

Alisha Prakash (Host): What is it, though, that makes it so hard for people—even still today, and especially Westerners—to believe that the Rapa Nui could have figured out how to move these statues?

Carl Lipo: One of the things we underestimate is the fact that people in the past were as clever as us. Well, they were just as smart as we were. They knew about, and would utilize, the center of mass, for example, the physical properties of rock. And so if you use the center of mass, you can rock and tilt things without a lot of effort. Now, if we had to move a gigantic statue, we'd get a giant crane, pick it up and move it. Without those things, you would experiment with as many ways you could do it and try to find the easiest way that's possible. And really, that's what the past people did and it's how they achieved some of these remarkable things. It wasn't because it was space aliens. It's just that they were good at it. They figured it out, and... The challenges to us is to figure out how they did it. And this is where we can learn a lot from our past.
**Alisha Prakash (Host):** So really, it’s a deep cultural connection between art and science that allowed the Rapa Nui of the past to achieve these feats that are hard for many of us today to even **begin** to understand. And in turn, it’s these impressive feats of art and science **combined** that helped the Rapa Nui to develop as a community and a culture…

**Carl Lipo:** Making art isn't just about individual expression. It's about bringing people together. It's about community action. When you're on an island that's only 10 by 14 miles across, thousands of miles from any other place and any other speck of land, working together with your neighbors and your family is really important. You need each other. You can't live without having the support of the people around you. So any mechanism that helps foster that kinda sense of cooperation is something that's incredibly important. These statues were made because it mattered and because they were very important to the people there on the island, they needed that cooperation, they needed that sharing in order to survive. Literally their livelihoods, their existence depended upon that sense of cooperation, the sense of community for generations.
Carl Lipo: A lot of the traditions that began in pre-contact time prior to arrival of Europeans have persisted through time and you see today in different formats and the nature of them is different, the community engagement with the arts is really something that remains important, and it’s because for many of the same reasons: that they’re still on an isolated island, still thousands of miles from everywhere else, and that they do need each other and they have to negotiate in a small landscape where there’s competition for resources. They have to deal with the fact that there’s gonna be conflict, and one of the ways they do that is through arts and sharing so that people have a sense of community and the sense of the long term needs of the island, that those needs overweight the individual needs.

Music: Incidental music fades up to full volume as we head into the next part.

=== Part 5: Today/Destinations. ===

Music: Incidental music fades in

AD BREAK

Alisha Prakash (Host): I’m Alisha Praksha, and you’re listening to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies, a podcast from Travel & Leisure

Music: Incidental music fades in and out under narrator’s voice

Alisha Prakash (Host): Recent years have brought changes to Rapa Nui. As mentioned before, the Chilean Navy took over, eventually ending the Williamson-Balfour Company’s use of the island for sheep farming, after they stopped renewing the company’s lease. The Navy’s management then ended in 1966, as the island was opened back up and the Rapa Nui were given Chilean citizenship. In fact, Sergio Rapu’s uncle was involved in the movement to gain the Rapa Nui their civil rights in the 1960s, and his father eventually became the first native governor of the island. More recent years have of course brought both struggles and accomplishments for the island and its people, just as the years have done for every other culture in the world. For instance, there have been movements aimed at gaining the Rapa Nui freedom from Chile, as well as efforts to limit the time visitors can stay on the island in order to protect it and the people themselves from the effects of ever-growing mass tourism. But just as each culture’s circumstances affect how they collectively move through the world, from location and environment to internal and external politics, the same is true for the Rapa Nui. So what is the place of the island and its people in the world today?
**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** Even though we’re part of a bigger country, we’re in this sort of weird Venn diagram, where culturally, we’re Pacific Islanders, we’re Polynesians. We have more in common with Hawaiians, and the Māori of New Zealand and Tahitians. But we’ve been colonized by Chile. And so every Rapa Nui that grows up there now speaks the indigenous language, and Spanish. You have sort of a Chilean ID, but you’re able to relate better with Hawaiians. It’s a complex identity to have. We’re like a little dot that exists within multiple worlds.

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** The Rapa Nui culture has shifted over time. Obviously, the influence of the sheep company, the influence of tourism, the influence of Covid – like, who hasn’t changed, throughout this time? What I find fascinating ... I mean, I’m a Rapa Nui that doesn’t live on Rapa Nui, and there’s a ton of other native Rapa Nui that live across the world. We all return to our island every once in a while to take a breath, and rejuvenate, and reconnect, and then we fly out to the corners of the world to continue our other lives. The sense of community no matter where you are, the sort of shared values, no matter where you are – I think that brings us all together and I will say this sense of adaptability. If I were to describe the Rapa Nui culture to anybody, I would say that the Rapa Nui culture is a happy culture because ... I mean, our songs are happy, yes, we have songs of lament. But most of them are fun, they’re upbeat, they’re happy, because we adapt to be able to survive. No matter what the world throws to us, I think Rapa Nui are able to figure out how to just keep moving.

**Carl Lipo:** In the modern sense, the island is incredibly international, this is a tourist place. People come from around the world. There are Japanese tourists, it’s a Chilean colony. There’s Americans going there. There’s Russians, there’s Europeans. And they’ve learned all these things in order to interact with everybody. Despite sort of the opposite of what you think of a remote, isolated population in the middle of the Pacific. They’re incredibly integrated with this international community because of the position that they play and the resources that they have, that people come visit them.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** And how about tourism? What effects has that industry had on the island and its people?

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** I think there’s a lot of really positive things that tourism has brought. In some ways, I am a product of tourism. My mom came as an exchange student early on. I don’t know if that counts as tourism or not, but tourism has helped to bring new ideas, new techniques, new information to our culture, and to our community in very positive ways. Tourism, of course, like any industry, also has its wastes. Oftentimes, that’s connected to people’s habits or just wants. You know, when anybody travels, I would say, to what would quote-unquote be “a third world country,” people are always worried about getting sick from
the water. "Don't drink the tap water 'cause you're gonna get sick, and that's gonna ruin your whole vacation." So what that causes is for tourists to buy bottled water. I totally get it; I used to do that. But we don't have recycling plants on the island. They're essentially then just packaged into a big package, and then put on a ship to send back to Chile. And that doesn't always happen. What ends up happening is then plastic bottles and similar things just sort of keep amassing on the island. In the last, I would say, 5 or 10 years there've been some really great local innovators and businesses being like, "We can do this differently. Let's make the big jugs of waters." It's still essentially bottled water, it's purified, it's all of that, but it's in a dispenser. And so then they've distributed that to hotels, to different businesses, even to local home. Now, tourists are encouraged to bring a reusable water bottle. It requires people to be a little bit more thoughtful, but ultimately, it has a massive impact. Same thing goes with creature comforts that people get staying in the Western in the U.S. Those are really hard to get in the middle of the ocean. Nevertheless, sometimes tourist just require it. The difference is that everything needs to be imported. I like reminding people, when you go to a restaurant in Rapa Nui and you order a can of soda, there's a good chance that can of soda came on the same plane that you came on, you know? And so, think about what is made locally, and how can you support more of that type of industry and those types of services.

**Carl Lipo:** One of the new innovations that they have on the island now, which I think is ultimately a great benefit to visitors, is they now require natives guides to go with people as they go across the island. That really adds a lot of context for anybody who's visiting now to travel with somebody who will take you to the different places and talk about their significance and their meaning. And I think that's ultimately very positive for both the visitors as well as the island because an economic dimension as well. It also helps because, as the number of tourists go up, we wanna make sure that the island is preserved or doesn't get degraded as a result of all those visitors. So anyone going to the island will get a good introduction to all of the amazing places that are there. I have to say, the most amazing place on the island for me is the quarry. It's the archeological Disneyland for us, where you can go there and see hundreds of statues in every stage of construction with all the tools and materials and sort of left in place by people who made these in the past all available to walk around and see. It's really unbelievable in terms of the magnitude of effort and the details of the technology. It's just spectacular. There's also hundreds of different ahu, these large platforms that have statues on them, some fantastically large ones like Akahanga along the south coast. Tahai in the town itself is a reconstructed series of ahu and statues that you can go visit.

**Sergio Mata’u Rapa:** There's a site called Tongariki. It has 15 moai standing on this massive platform. And you can go there before sunrise. So you essentially arrive when it's completely dark, 4:50, 5:00 in the morning. And you can watch the sun come up out of the ocean behind the moai. It forces you to kind of be quiet in the darkness. That's why I love it. You arrive in sort of complete dark, or sometimes if you're lucky, the stars are out, and the stars are still just incredible in Rapa Nui. It's one of the few places I wanna say in Chile where there's very little light pollution. So you can see just the massive amount of stars, but then slowly, those stars kind of fade away, early morning light starts coming up, and then you have a sense of these massive black figures right in front of you. And so then, as the light comes in, you start seeing the moai a
little bit clear. But it’s a good hour or two of just sort of sitting, and meditation, and just being in space that is an incredibly impactful experience that I hope everybody that goes to Rapa Nui has.

**Carl Lipo:** Yeah, it's important to recognize this is a living culture that is directly descended from the ancestors that arrived on the island in the 13th century. There's no break. You can go visit and talk to people who are Rapa Nui descendants of the people who made statues. When I talk to students, they're sort of surprised that that's the case. Because of the way it's often portrayed as being this windswept island with statues lonely sitting on the coast, looking out, they think it's abandoned. They say, "Well, how do you get there?" I'm like, "Well, you take a plane. You go in Santiago and you get on a plane, and it lands there and there's hotels and restaurants." The context of that island is still living and very present to those people. There's an immense awareness of the archeological past. The reason why they're there is because their ancestors were successful, and they need to understand that past and the archeological record because that's the guidance for them in the future in a very real sense. Right now, of course they rely on a lot of global interaction and resources from everywhere. But they need to rely on themselves and be able to dip into their traditions in order to survive. COVID was a great case of that. People were stuck on the island for about 586 days... if they left the island, they weren't able to come back, so what they had on the island was what they had. Things were brought in, but on limited sort of military flights. They were very isolated, and that's the point at which you go back to your traditions, and despite modern technology, they need each other and the lessons of their ancestors in order to continue. So it's a really amazing, dynamic, living place and they're absolutely aware of the value that archeology and the past has for them.

**Sergio Mata’u Rapu:** My biggest recommendation on where to learn about Rapa Nui is from the people themselves. I think for a while, the marketing around visiting Rapa Nui, is that, "You can see it all within three days and two nights. So just zip around the island a couple times and then you're done." And the truth is that type of tourism is very different than the type of tourism that was around when I was a kid. Where because there is only one flight every two weeks, people had to stay longer. When you're in a place for a lot longer than just a couple of days, you're forced to shift your lifestyle, and your daily, like, "This is what I do," type of schedule to be more in sync with the community that lives there. And you build relationships, you're able to spend quiet time among the moai, not just sort of, like, rushed in and out tour groups. Ultimately, that is what leaves a bigger impact. Not only for the visitor, but also for the Rapa Nui. Because the tourist gets a better understanding of the Rapa Nui culture, and community, and pacing, and vice versa the Rapa Nui then also essentially makes a friend and then goes home, and then there would be stories of, people writing letters. It was a really good time, I think.

**Music: Incidental music begins as bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** And don’t forget, Sergio Rapu is a filmmaker, so one way of learning about Rapa Nui – both the people and the place – is to watch the 2018 documentary he directed as you hopefully prepare to visit yourself…
Sergio Mata’u Rapu: ‘Eating up Easter’ is really a story about what is impacting Rapa Nui today versus a story about the history of the island. They’re interconnected, in a sense. But really, my wife and I saw the disconnect between the understanding that people had before they visited the island, and then what they experienced while they were on the island. The general understanding from the outside is that there are these statues, and there was this collapse, and then something happened to the Rapa Nui people, right? So much of media out there really sort of centers around our moai, and never really sort of focuses on the people. And so our intention was, "Well, let's talk about the people today, and what are the big issues?" And the biggest, really, are around development. How does this tiny island develop into the future? How are we addressing tourism? And then all combined within that is essentially sort of the trash issue. What happens to all of these plastic bottles that are generated? How do we survive as a community, as a island in the middle of the Pacific? So ‘Eating up Easter’ really looks at these issues of development, tourism, and trash from a Rapa Nui perspective for a Western audience.

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays for a moment.

=== CREDITS ===

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Thank you to our guests, Sergio Mata’u Rapu and Carl Lipo.

Be sure to follow Lost Cultures: Living Legacies on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And we’d love your feedback. If you could, please rate this podcast and leave us a review. We’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at travelandleisure.com/lostcultures. In our next episode, we’ll explore the Nubian culture of Egypt, so make sure to come back for that. Until then, enjoy your travels!

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up for a moment, then back down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Lost Cultures: Living Legacies is a production of Travel + Leisure and Dotdash Meredith. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash, Associate Editorial Director at Travel + Leisure. Lottie Leymarie is our Executive Producer. Jeremiah McVay is our Writer and Co-producer. Dominique Arciero is our Audio Engineer and Editor. Stacey Leasca is our Researcher. Kyle Avallone is our fact-checker. This episode was reviewed by Bryan A’Hearn, a panelist on Dotdash Meredith’s Anti-Bias Review Board, as well as Mackenzie Price, Director of Anti-Bias Initiatives. Jennifer Del Sole is Director for Audio Growth Strategy & Operations at
Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays out.