

# A Comparative Study of Moai Tourism between Minami Sanriku Town and Easter Island

Taichi Uchio  
Assistant Professor  
Faculty of Foreign Studies, Reitaku University

## 1. Introduction

Several cultural properties attract a disproportionate degree of human curiosity in the world. One representative example is the Moai of Easter Island. Moai are known to the world as the remnants of a megalithic civilization prosperous during the 10th to the 16th century on the island. Since the late 20th century, the lost civilization has lured public attention through anthropological and archeological research projects linked with various media (Heyerdahl 1958, Englert 1970, Mulloy and Figueora 1978). Especially, the mysteries of Easter Island have spurred people's interest all over the world, asking such questions as "Where did the ancestors of the islanders come from?," "What kind of arts and skills were used for the production and transport of Moai?," or "Why did the civilization collapse?" Furthermore, Rapa Nui National Park, which consists of a large part of the island, was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage (cultural heritage) site in 1995.

This research note is based on the connection between Easter Island and Japan. First of all, as a geographical premise, it is not easy to access the isolated island from Japan. The regular flights via Santiago de Chile take about 33-38 hours. Though charter flights via Tahiti will be between 15 and 19 hours, the eight day packaged tour from Tokyo is expensive at JPY 969,000 (Nippon Travel Agency 2018). Nonetheless, the island and Moai are also famous in Japan. Starting with the translation of *Aku-Aku* of Thor Heyerdahl in 1958, the mysteries of the island have sparked the interest of Japanese people. Since then, TV programs and guidebooks have introduced the presence of the island frequently. In addition, many travelogues of the island have been published (Sakai 1970, Morimoto 1975, Suzuki 1999).

On the other hand, the Moai of Easter Island can be found in Japan as well. This is an essential fact in this research. Moreover, the statues are not only rare but also reflect stories of international exchange and cooperation between Japan and Easter Island (or Chile). For example, there are seven replicas of Moai in Nichinan City, Miyazaki Prefecture. They were created with the official permission of authorities of the island. In the background, Japanese companies and research institutes have cooperated in the restoration of the set of Moai on the east coast of Easter Island in the 1990's.

This time, the author pays attention to Minami Sanriku Town, Miyagi Prefecture. This town from historically related to Chile due to the tsunami disaster across the Pacific Ocean. Also, the government of Chile donated a newly carved Moai in Easter Island to the town for the reconstruction effort following the Great East Japan Earthquake. With concern about community revitalization in the era of aging, the original Moai is expected to work as a symbol of the town, especially in the realm of the tourism industry.

The purpose of this research is to compare and understand tourism phenomena occurring around Moai in different social environments, i.e., Easter Island in Chile and Minami Sanriku Town in Japan [Figure 1]. For that purpose, the author has launched ethnographic research in these areas. The research on Easter Island contains observations of the current situation of authentic Moai tourism and interviews with people involved in the donation project for the disaster-hit area in Japan. In Minami Sanriku Town, the author describes how the donated Moai has taken root in the local society.

The research is a part of an artifact-oriented anthropology that focuses on Moai. Since the project has only just begun, we need to be conscious of the



Figure 1: Map showing the location of Easter Island and Minami Sanriku Town.

general trends of anthropology in recent years. Among them, *Thinking Through Things* by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell provides us with an efficient approach for this research. They relativize the conventional human-centered view on the relationship between “things” and “meaning” as typified by signified versus signifier. Instead, they insist as follows: “Things might be treated as sui generis meanings,” and “Meanings are not ‘carried’ by things but just are identical to them” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 3-4). In summary, what *Thinking Through Things* proposes is a significant shift from plural perspectives on the same things to a plurality of ontologies of the things considered to be “the same.”

Following the approach above, this research recognizes Moai as “things.” Then, what does “thinking through Moai” come to mean? Firstly, it requires the author to differentiate Moai on Easter Island and Moai in Minami Sanriku Town deliberately, even though the historical origin and primary materials are the same. Secondary, it encourages a radical comparison of the interaction between Moai and local people in each ethnographic setting. Finally, it allows revealing the plural meanings within the same object in a diverse world.

At the end of this introduction, let us look at the structure of this research note. The next section

illustrates how the relationship between Minami Sanriku Town and Chile, including Easter Island, took shape as the research background. Based on this information, the author will introduce a form of Moai tourism that parallels the recovery process of the earthquake and tsunami of 2011 in Minami Sanriku Town, and then, the original Moai tourism on Easter Island in a comparative manner. In closing this note, the future research subject will be described as the result of ‘thinking through Moai.’

## 2. Bonds of Tsunami

Early in the morning of May 24, 1960, a powerful tsunami struck Shizugawa Town (now Minami Sanriku Town) from the distant southern hemisphere. This disaster stemmed from the magnitude 9.5 Valdivia Earthquake that occurred around 7:11 pm on May 22 of the same year in southern Chile. About 22 hours after the earthquake, the first wave of the tsunami reached Japan's Pacific Coast, approximately 17,000 km away from the epicenter. As a result, 41 people in Shizugawa Town lost their lives in the tsunami.

However, the distant tsunami from Chile did not end up merely a misery for Shizugawa Town. Thirty years after the tragedy, on May 24, 1990, the Chilean Ambassador to Japan of the day visited the town and

sent a message of friendship as we see below.

Chile has also been deeply moved on the motive of the thirtieth anniversary of the tsunami that devastated the town as well as the southern Chilean coast, a natural phenomenon with lamentable consequences. It contributed to cementing the bonds of friendship and understanding between both peoples, and this monument will be a future witness of the union. We express our sincere adherence to this long-standing and fraternal relationship. (Embassy of The Republic of Chile 1990: 72)

Furthermore to develop this relationship, in 1991 Shizugawa Town imported a Moai replica from the mainland of Chile and located it in a neighborhood park facing the sea. After that, a town development council on the utilization of the Moai was also set up, and since then, imitations and illustrations of the Moai have spread across the town. After becoming Minami Sanriku Town by a merger of municipalities in 2005, the business course of Shizugawa High School started "Minami Sanriku Moai Plan" for the regional revitalization from 2010. Its activities were aimed at product development with the Moai as a motif, PR activities outside the town, improvement of disaster prevention awareness, and further international exchange with Chile.

On March 11th of the following year, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck, and it destroyed the whole town. The ensuing tsunami swept away the Moai replica, and only the head was found in the rubble. As an important event in its reconstruction process, Sebastián Piñera, the President of Chile at the time, visited Minami Sanriku Town after the summit meeting in Tokyo in March 2012. Seeing the separated and battered head of the Moai replica, he promised in front of the press to donate a new Moai to the town.

With that remark as a trigger, people from Minami Sanriku Town, the Embassy of the Republic of Chile in Japan, The Japan-Chile Business Cooperation Committee and private enterprises in both countries comprised the executive committee for the Moai project. Moreover, the Moai of this project is a genuine statue that local sculptors carved

the stone on Easter Island.

The authentic Moai of 3 meters in height and 2 tons in weight arrived at Yokohama Port by ship in November 2012. Firstly, the Moai was exhibited in Tokyo in April 2013, then in Osaka in May. After that, it was finally set up in Minami Sanriku Town [Figure 2]. There, a hat-shaped rock called "pukao" was placed on top of the Moai's head, and eyes made of white coral and obsidian were fitted in the "Eye Opening Ceremony" on May 25th. At the ceremony, many local people and project personnel, including the Ambassador of Chile to Japan and Benedict Tuki, a sculptor from Easter Island, were present. They prayed for the town's recovery in front of the Moai with its full complement of traditional decorations.



Figure 2: The photo was taken in May 2015.

### 3. Minami Sanriku Town

In this section, the author describes the Moai tourism during the disaster recovery process in Minami Sanriku Town in more detail. The attention of the media intensified in light of the Moai's origins on Easter Island. The installation site is the entrance

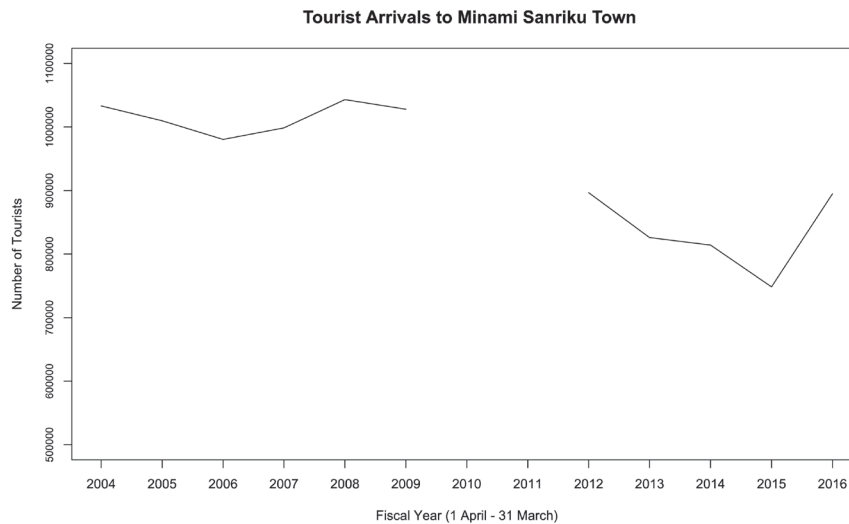


Figure 3: The Author elaborated (Minami Sanriku Town 2018). No data in 2010 and 2011 because of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

of the temporary commercial area for tourists. Since then, it has become a tourism resource unique to Minami Sanriku Town, and something that cannot be found in any other neighboring disaster-hit area.

However, the situation facing Minami Sanriku Town after the disaster is still severe. One of the reasons is the declining population. The 2015 census, which was implemented for the first time after the Great East Japan Earthquake, revealed that the population of the town had decreased from 17,429 in 2010 to 12,370. This population decrease rate of -29.03% is the second worst in Miyagi prefecture [Miyagi Prefecture 2017: 7]. Against the decline of the settled population which cannot be stopped because of the aging structure, a basic strategy is to increase tourism to revitalize the community. However, although the town became famous nationwide due to the catastrophe, the number of tourists who occupy its major market has not yet recovered to the level it was before the earthquake [Figure 3].

The tourism association of Minami Sanriku Town conducted a questionnaire survey for tourists in the town in October 2016. Nearly half of the 484 samples were visitors from Miyagi prefecture. The percentage of utilization for each shop in the commercial area was about 70% for “eating and drinking establishments,” followed by “souvenir goods dealers” and “food and marine products dealers” respectively with about 30%. According to the free description section on favorite goods and

expected products, even though many tourists are interested in the seafood, they also mention the Moai as the popular attraction other than food.

In Minami Sanriku Town, two principal local actors are working on regional revitalization by making use of the Moai in the town. One is Shizugawa High School, which was engaged in “Minami Sanriku Moai Plan” since before the earthquake occurred. The other is a souvenir manufacturer which started its business after 3.11. Though the two are different in status (nonprofit / profit), both actively leverage the Moai from Easter Island and develop their projects.

Hiroaki Sasaki, a business course faculty member at Shizugawa High School, has recruited students for participation every year and realized long-term activities. The motivated students in the early days designed variously costume-clad Moai and tried to build the image of a local mascot [Figure 4]. After a temporary interruption due to the disaster, they restarted the Moai plan and continued to sell badges and straps featuring the Moai illustrations. By 2016, they donated the total proceeds amounting to JPY 6,500,000 to the town as a fund to purchase a minibus for the local people. The bus was wrapped with paintings of Japanese and Chilean flags and Moai. Local adults also cooperated with the high school students as “Minasan Moai Supporters.” Kiyomi Suzuki, a local community manager, is one of them. They instructed high school students on how to sell the goods and cultivated sales channels. Also,

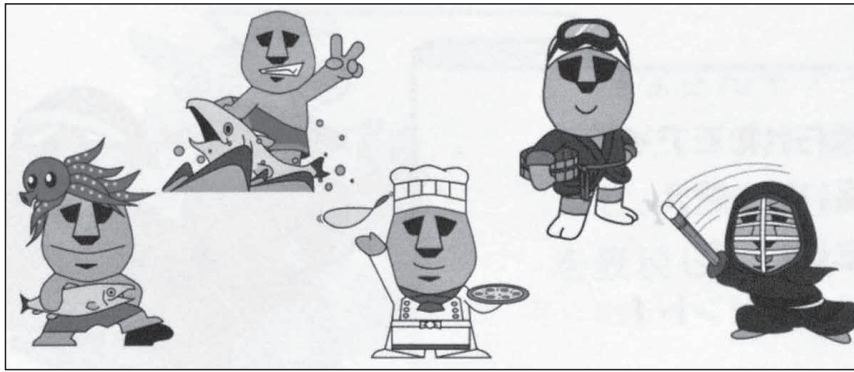


Figure 4: (Minasan Moai Supporters 2013: 1).

they issued “Moai town free paper” to introduce the efforts of high school students to residents in the area. Suzuki has high expectations for the activities of local youth.

Next, let us look into a significant souvenir manufacturer. Kenichi Yanai, the creator of “Minami Sanriku Moai Family,” came to Minami Sanriku Town in 2012 from outside the prefecture to support the disaster-hit people. While working at the local tourism association, he was also planning his own business related to the Moai from Easter Island. In this way, he began character branding of “Minami Sanriku Moai Family” which consists of 5 members, i.e., a baby Moai, his parents, his older brother, and older sister [Figure 5]. The design adds cuteness to the actual Moai. The first item Yanai released was Moai candy. Since then, he has produced many Moai goods such as magnets, T-shirts, and miniature statues made of sand at the local coast. He also offers peculiar services such as Moai *omikuji* (paper fortune) and Moai virtual stickers for LINE (an SNS launched in Japan). His company's products are not only handled in many local souvenir shops, but also in the net shop. He says he is also interested in business collaborations with people of Easter Island.

In addition to the mascot work as stated above, Moai in Japan has an original meaning. It is believed that the word “Moai” in the local language of Easter Island means “living for the future” (“mo” stands for “future” and “ai” for “to survive”). However, looking up a dictionary of Rapanui, which is an Eastern Polynesian language spoken in Easter Island, “moai” simply means “statue” and there is no such allegory (Kohaumotu 2014). As a result of the author's research in Easter Island which is described in detail in the next section, the belief was also clearly denied by a Japanese guide staying long on the site.

So, where did this misunderstanding come from? As the author scrutinized the cause, a travelogue was published in October 1990 by Wahei Tatematsu, a Japanese novelist who has already passed away, and it is the oldest record at this time. Tatematsu introduced Moai in his text as the thing meant to be “living for the future” in his text, but he does not specify the source for the definition (Tatematsu 1990: 208-209). With the writing of Tatematsu as a reference, the construction crane company TADANO, which was involved in the Moai restoration project in the 1990's, has popularized the future-oriented meaning through its website (TADANO 2018). Also,

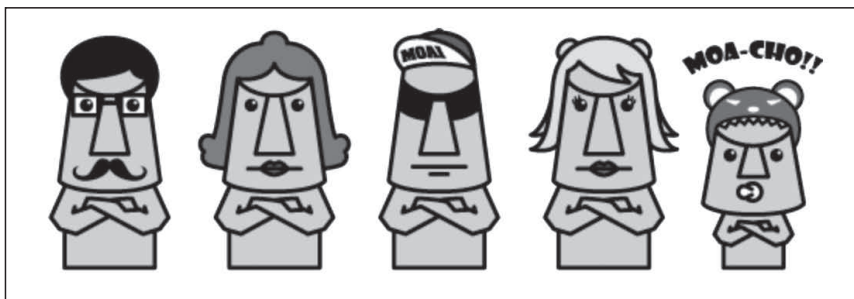


Figure 5: (Minami Sanriku Moai Family 2018).

the homepage of Sunmesse Nichinan, another domestic tourist site for Moai in Miyazaki Prefecture, cites the same text (Sunmesse Nichinan 2016).

Furthermore, in Minami Sanriku Town, the meaning of Moai as “living for the future” was consciously connected to the context of disaster reconstruction. The tourism association also disseminates it as a part of the story of the Moai donated from Easter Island. Today, leaving aside the question of truth, the real Moai has become something delivering a positive message from the disaster-hit area.

#### 4. Easter Island

In this research note, we also refer to Moai tourism on Easter Island. The author conducted a field survey from February to March 2018. Its primary purposes were to clarify the features of Moai tourism in Minami Sanriku Town through the comparison and to listen to the islanders involved in the project of donating the Moai.

Easter Island is the origin of Moai Tourism. Regarding this island, there is an accumulation of research which tries to elucidate the ancient megalithic civilization. On the other hand, research on tourism on Easter Island is still scarce. One of a few valuable studies is a questionnaire survey carried out by faculty members and graduate students of the Department of Economics at the University of Chile. According to this study, the aims of tourists from foreign countries and the mainland of Chile are first, archaeological heritage, then cultural heritage, and finally, tranquility (Figueroa, et al. 2016: 251).

Despite the geographical conditions, there are many Japanese tourists: participants of packaged tours, travelers with around the world tickets, and backpackers who make a side trip from South America. According to the census of the National Statistics Institute of Chile in 2013, among the 28,094 foreign tourists who visited Rapa Nui National Park during that year, Japanese (2,318 people) ranked in fourth place (National Statistics Institute of Chile 2013: 21). On the island, several Japanese guides were settled, and one of them runs a guesthouse specialized for people from Japan.

To see the Moai in Rapa Nui National Park,

which is the centerpiece of tourism on the island, tourists must pay an entrance fee (54,000 Chilean Peso as of 2018). Because of its human historical value, the rules of sightseeing are stipulated in the national monument law. In the official map, the following cautionary notes are written. “Look, do not Touch,” “Stay away from ancient statues,” “Do not climb or walk on the stone structure,” “Do not pick up any stone of other objects” (Rapanui National Park 2008). In order to watch the scattered heritage sites, tourists rent cars, quad bikes, or bicycles in Hanga Roa, the only town on the island on the west coast. By coincidence, the size of the island is 160 square kilometers, and it is almost the same as Minami Sanriku Town.

As in the previous section, here let us examine the souvenir business, an essential element of Moai tourism. Most Moai goods such as key holders or figures at the island souvenir stores are more realistic and more straightforward than those described in Japan. The materials are wood, stone, sand, and marble. The author believes the local people do not change the Moai's design substantially because the statues are the subject of their ancestral worship. The tourists can also buy one-of-a-kind handcrafted Moai, which are made by local sculptors. Although the prices are high, ingenuities appear in making good use of the material properties such as wood grain or in engraving minute patterns on the back [Figure 6]. Such simpler souvenirs and original artworks are different from Japanese Moai goods.



Figure 6: The photo was taken in March 2018.

During the stay, the author conducted interviews with Benedict Tuki and Ana María Arredondo. Bene Tuki handled the creation of the Moai donated to Minami Sanriku Town as the leader of sculptors in

the project. Ana María, Bene's spouse, is a history teacher, researcher of Rapa Nui culture and artist. She wrote "Un Moai para Japón" that is an illustrated book based on the story of the project (Arredondo 2013).

In the interview, Bene answered that he always thinks of Minami Sanriku Town. He was pleased to hear that the Moai has been contributing to the reconstruction. Ana María recalls how impressive the warmth of people in Minami Sanriku was when they visited there to attend the ceremony of the Moai in 2013. She also said that she reaffirmed the tradition of the island in the process of writing her book. While Bene's team was working, people on the island brought food for the sculptors and the children came to play around the statue in progress. On the island, where individualism is growing, she could feel the form of community common in the "good old days."

## 5. Summary and Implications for Further Research

In this research note, we have compared the Moai tourism of Minami Sanriku Town and Easter Island. Even though, these Moai are created on the same island, made of the same material, and look to be the same shape, each existential presupposition differs significantly. For the people of Easter Island, the Moai are not only ancestral but also the very existence of their ancestors (cf. Arredondo 2013). That being so, the Moai in Japan is no one's ancestor but a common character.

Although it is less resistant to arranging original designs, it does not seem that the people in Minami Sanriku Town show any lack of respect for the Moai. Preferably, it is altered to elicit loveliness and familiarity. In this way, the process that a commemorative cultural property donated from overseas becomes a tourism resource and the branching and growth of its images is an exciting theme for artifact-oriented anthropology. The author presumes that this case study of Moai is related to "Kawaii (cuteness)" culture in contemporary Japan.

There is another notable difference. Where the Moai of Easter Island show real traces of the past, the Moai in Minami Sanriku is believed to look at the future with both eyes. Even if that recognition comes

from a misinterpretation in the 1990's, the author does not intend to rectify it. That is because the discourse engendered from the Moai consequently has given hopes to the disaster-hit people of the town and their supporters.

The fruit of this comparative research between Minami Sanriku Town and Easter Island is that it reveals a divergence within Moai tourism. The future task for Minami Sanriku Town is to avoid breaking ties with Easter Island while walking its independent path of tourism promotion. For the moment, the culture of Easter Island such as their birdman cult or seafood dishes has not been sufficiently introduced to the town, hidden behind the presence of Moai characters. Regardless of how the Moai is used, the key to the development of such tourism is a mutual understanding between each people living with it.

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