ABSTRACT
2008 saw the culmination of several years of effort on Rapanui to achieve a better position in the Chilean nation. The arguments for achieving this were cast in historical terms, to 1888, when there was a voluntary agreement signed between the government of Rapanui and the government of Chile. The paper discusses the ambiguous terms of this agreement that was bi-lingual as were many such documents in Eastern Polynesia at that time. Those who argued for autonomy within the Chilean state did so on the basis of the Spanish terms of that agreement whilst those opposed them did so on the basis of the Rapanui language of the same document. The paper discusses some of those debates, including why Chile constantly is willing to change the status of Rapanui within its French republic inspired constitution.

Keywords
Rapanui (Easter Island); Autonomy; Chile.

1. INTRODUCTION
Mostly people stop reading about Rapanui (Easter Island) when something about contemporary life on that remote place appears. Such descriptions seem too modern, too new and, so, too uninteresting.

But all who have visited Rapanui find the population there lively, friendly and very welcoming. This is true whether the visit was in 1774, 1874 or last week.

Old hands who knew Rapanui in their youth will decry its present day as “not what it used to be” or, simply, “changed”.

For change has been the theme for the island’s entire history, from its emergence from the ocean depths in a gush of glowing lava to the latest arrival or new trend by ship, air and, now, the Internet.

2. History and Stakeholders
The core of Rapanui society and culture came from Eastern Polynesia, with its kinship system, naming method and use of physical space. Over some centuries – there is debate about how many – Rapanui has continued to evolve through environmental and social influences; the Little Ice Age impacts and the coming of outsiders to reside on their land (see McCall 1998).

Through all of this, the Rapanui have responded with intelligence and invention, their latest transformation being into an autonomous region within the South American state of Chile.

Rapanui is not really a colony of Chile and, so, is not eligible for its independence as expressed in United Nations Resolution 1541. As it was fully incorporated into the Chilean state in 1966, it ceases to have a United Nations option, at least, for any separation, however slight, from Chile.

The four stakeholders that prompted Chile to annex Rapanui remain almost the same 120 years later regarding Rapanui’s association with Chile, although one of them has changed its personnel: the business of Rapanui no longer is in the hands of outsiders as it was in the past (before 1966): all business of any importance is in the hands of Rapanui, except for one of the big hotels and LAN, the Chilean airline. Only the Hanga Roa hotel does not sit on Rapanui land, through an illegal, though accidental, manoeuvre that took place during the Pinochet dictatorship, but one which is unlikely ever to be corrected as the interests are far too powerful for anyone on Rapanui to take on.

Rapanui business is largely tourism, and those involved in that activity vary in their approach to Chile. Some have supported even separatist movements as undoubtedly independence from Chilean institutions and laws well could benefit their freedom to negotiate. There have been Rapanui attempts to take on the Chilean shipping companies, but these have ended in bankruptcy so far. No one seriously has tried to take on the LAN airline monopoly and all complain about the high prices for air travel and air cargo: very few Rapanui in business or not would support the continuing monopoly if given an option. Again, LAN is a powerful institution and it is unlikely to be dislodged from its privileged position of controlling all air traffic to Rapanui.

The Chilean state as a stakeholder remains committed to Rapanui. As expressed by several speakers at a recent 2008 Chilean Navy sponsored symposium, the inclusion of Rapanui in the national territory enlarges the country by three times, when coupled with Chilean claims in Antarctica. Although there are not supposed to be any taxes collected on Rapanui, everything sourced from Chile includes the Chilean purchase tax that is paid at point of sale on the Mainland. No Rapanui resident pays any taxes on business and property on the island, but when they invest in the Mainland, they are taxed like anyone else. In the Chilean tourism campaigns, Rapanui figures always as a way of attracting tourists to Chile. Many politicians over the years have an affection for “their” Rapanui and that special feeling is emphasized by the Rapanui themselves when talking to their powerful friends. Some Islanders have called this the “Rapanui passport” which they can use to their advantage in dealing with (especially) Mainland Chileans which they call “Continentalas” or people from the “Conti”. A few Rapanui public figures have attempted to soften this apparent gap between “Chileans” and “Rapanui” by referring to the Island as “Oceanic Chile” and the Mainland as “Continental Chile”. These phrases are not common or used much. Sometimes the Chilean state has waved in its commitment to Rapanui as when the island was turned over to commercial interests or when there was a deal negotiated between Chile and Japan for that latter country to purchase the place (see McCall 1995).

A third stakeholder is the ordinary Rapanui in the street, as it were, who has multiple associations with Chile and may even
count an ancestor or two these days as a Chilean. Most Islander’s educational careers come from the Chilean system; any professional qualifications almost certainly will be Chilean derived or approved. People have relatives living in Chile and as time goes on tastes in food, dress and life become increasingly national Chilean. Although the Chilean government makes some efforts through the school to foster Rapanui language, that tongue suffers from the bombardment of Spanish language in all media. There still is an effective travel barrier between Rapanui and the rest of the Pacific, although every four years there is an island delegation that attends the South Pacific Festival of the Arts sponsored by the South Pacific Commission and its members. When those commissions go to the Pacific, Chilean officials who have nothing to do with Rapanui often attempt to get on the list of supported travellers. Chile does not put a high priority these days on Rapanui participation in the South Pacific Festival of the Arts and does not support Rapanui involvement in any other Pacific Island forum or institution; that is part of Chile’s consistent suspicion of Rapanui “separatist” feelings which, of course, are exacerbated by such Chilean attitudes.

Finally, the consistent fourth stakeholder in the Chile-Rapanui relationship remains the Navy. The Chilean Navy remains the prestige armed force in Chile, self-consciously deriving its dress and paraphernalia from the British institution. Elite families of the past always made certain that one of their number was a member—usually an officer—in the Navy. Easter Island and the long Chilean coast justify the Navy and give it a major role in national life. Again, at that 2008 Chilean Navy sponsored symposium that took place in the neo-classical lecture theatre of the Naval Museum and centre in Valparaiso, it was emphasised that Chile is a maritime country; that most of its trade is by sea and that the overwhelming majority of its territory is maritime. The Navy supports the concept of the “Mar Presencial” which figures only on Chilean published maps. In any Law of the Sea negotiations, the Navy insists on its pivotal role, other armed forces, such as the American inspired Air Force or the Prussian styled army having little to say about Rapanui. The national police force (Carabineros) has the largest number of personnel on Rapanui itself and for longer periods, but takes no special role in Rapanui affairs. The Air Force has few personnel and no planes on Rapanui whilst the Army is absent except for sometimes administering national service. The Navy at least has a rubber hulled (timber cabin) rescue boat and a couple dozen marines and officers who change periodically. A Naval officer and crew run the port authority, as in all Chile. The support of the Chilean Navy for the island as a whole and for furthering the careers of individual Rapanui has been unwavering since 1888.

3. Rapanui Today
Many Rapanui have nostalgia for the pre-1966 period, seeing it as a time of freedom on a personal level. True, people could not freely roam over the island, much less travel without special permission to Chile: travel to Polynesia was strictly forbidden. But there were few other regulations in place. Using the Rapanui language, Islanders could exclude the outsiders effectively from communal life: rarely did the authorities intervene in family celebrations and never with ecclesiical ones, unless they were invited for personal reasons.

As long as the Chilean realm was not touched and that was relatively easy, Rapanui were free to be themselves. Symbolically, the outsiders (from the early missionary and commercial settlers in the 1860s onwards) lived in their own compound at Mataveri, on the other side of the location of the international airport today. Most of the islanders lived in Hangaroa, still the main settlement and the capital where the school, hospital and most businesses are found. Moeroa was the in-between place where Rapanui who had close connections with the foreign authorities resided.

With all the resentments of the period of confinement and the memories of those few who tried to escape, few acknowledge that it was an unintended consequence of that imprisonment that the Rapanui language and many traditional customs survived for such a long time. Furthermore, this confinement bolstered a sense of commonality amongst Rapanui. Whilst the Islanders might find multiple differences between themselves, they found more divergence between what was Rapanui and what was outsider: the demarcation was clear and unambiguous, which it is far from the case today.

People who had known foreign ancestors, and even used their exotic surnames, were Rapanui, but with a different background. Those whose ancestors came from other parts of Polynesia could be identified as such, but they were Rapanui. Those others whose fathers did not remain on the island for any length of time and who did not pass on their family names, who looked different from the majority of the population, were also incorporated into the Rapanui community, marked by Catholicism, their common language and their daily common behaviour within a range of variation that can be called “Rapanui”. The rest of Polynesia remained a distant story as they had little exposure to it through their isolation and the ban on travelling in that direction, as well as the ban on any ships coming from there, without first landing and asking permission in Valparaiso!

There are other elements of continuity on Rapanui that the visitor or short-term resident may (or may not) notice.

When the Catholic fathers converted and baptised the Rapanui, they typically gave them transliterated Tahitian names from the Bible. So, Adam became Atamu, Stephen became Tepano and so on. When Chile annexed Rapanui in 1888, there was a census that had been taken two years earlier showing people’s baptismal and “pagan” names. The Chilean authorities took these “pagan” names to be family names and, so, the stock of Rapanui surnames was created, although they were not commonly used until the second half of the twentieth century.

In my forthcoming book (McCall 2010) I provide a full list of how Rapanui family names evolved, listing the thirty-two family names that most people would regard as being “Rapanui”.

At any one time, about a quarter of the Rapanui population resides overseas, mainly in Chile, but also elsewhere in the European world, where they have gone to study, work and live with their outsider partners and resulting families. Sometimes, the draw to the island is strong, and people will return from their overseas places to live on the island for a few weeks or months; some return, leaving their foreign life behind.

In the summer months, one can see purposeful Rapanui dressed in foreign fashion from Europe or North America moving about, visiting relatives and being a part of their nostalgic home once again. Sometimes, these returnees are accompanied by bewildered children, hopeful to discover their parent’s Polynesian heritage, who may decide to return themselves one day.
There are not many ancient customs that survive amongst the Rapanui population today, although some families and individuals pride themselves on their knowledge and practice of the past. A custom that appears to be reviving is the burying of the afterbirth of a newborn child in the ground belonging to that family. This custom is found in many parts of Polynesia and comes from the name of the afterbirth/umbilical cord and the name for ancestral land being the same: “henua”.

Whilst Rapanui “nicknames” always flourished on Rapanui, it is only in the last few decades that infants are being given indigenous personal names, sometimes quite elaborate ones. This conforms to ancient Rapanui (and Polynesian) practice that the name of each child should commemorate something special about them as individuals. They do not derive from a common stock of conventional names as found in European societies. Related to this is a provision of the Chilean Government “Ley Indigena” which permits people to swap their surnames so that an indigenous one may be preserved as the first surname in the Chilean naming system. So, Daniel Muñoz Rapahango can legally change his name to Daniel Rapahango Muñoz. Typically in the community people are known better by their nicknames than their legal ones, which is similar to what people do in any small village.

Many people recognise a tie to their ancestral land and in this regard oral tradition and the exacting work of the Elder’s Council (Consejo de Ancianos in Spanish) has been a truthful guide. People will spend a weekend or other leisure time on “their” land, some saying they can feel the ancestral protective spirits who dwell there.

As I mentioned, the Rapanui language is under attack from multiple foreign sources, but primarily Chilean Spanish. Counter to this is the teaching of that language in immersion classes where all subjects in primary school are taught in Rapanui. There also are formal and informal committees of Rapanui who dedicate themselves to preparing dictionaries and other linguistic materials. The Rapanui language is encouraged on the local television and radio stations.

4. Conclusion

A common Rapanui story about the 1966 change from the dominated past to the autonomous present is to recount it in terms of the carrying off of the skull of Hotu Matu’a, the culture hero. According to the story, there were two Rapanui who were guardians of this skull, which was characterised by its size and the fact that it had various sacred engravings on it. In 1963, a French adventurer and popular author, Francis Mazière came to the island from Tahiti with his Tahitian wife and stayed for less than a year doing his research, which resulted in a many times over best seller, “Mysterious Easter Island” translated into many languages. As Mazière also dabbled in “antiquities” and exotic souvenirs, he had made for him a number of carvings, some of which he claimed to outsiders after he left were ancient in origin. Mazière asked the two Rapanui guardians of the skull to loan him the precious relic or, at least, to let him look at it. In return, he offered gifts of used clothing. In the end, Mazière set sail with the skull, the whereabouts of which is unknown today.

In an interview I had with Francis Mazière in his flat in Paris in 1986, he denied all knowledge of these events, although he did admit to taking human bones from the island, to sell to “universities”, unspecified. Many Rapanui on the island and living overseas forlornly seek the return of the skull of Hotu Matu’a which they believe will restore Rapanui to happiness and contentment.

Some Rapanui say that the departure of the Hotu Matu’a skull is the beginning of the end of a distinctive Rapanui culture. There is a traditional Rapanui song, really a kind of national hymn, that morns the death and departure of the culture hero Hotu Matu’a in ancient times; with the departure of the skull, the mana of the island is gone and one might add symbolically, its autonomy from the Chilean state and its institutions.

The excitement and interest of Rapanui today is that this dynamic history is being discussed and a fulsome future being contemplated by the Islanders themselves. Throughout their monumental ancient times and their more recent history the Rapanui have continued to adapt to a changing physical, social and cultural world. And they continue to do so today, before the eyes of anyone who cares to pay attention.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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6. REFERENCES


1 The contemporary popular performing group, “Matato’a” interprets this piece, based on a traditional text, always to great audience response. They call it “I he ‘a Hotu Matu’a” on their CD “Te Pito o te Henua”, self-released (http://www.matatoa.20m.com)