Anyone who has listened to recordings from Rapanui (Easter Island) will recognise the voice of “Papa Kiko”/Luis (Avaka) Pate Paoa soaring high above the rest with his distinctive tonality.

Luis Pate was born on Rapanui when people still were penned within their village and not permitted to travel outside that boundary without special permission. The Chilean authorities kept an iron hold on the island in those days, controlling access to all but a few visitors, either as tourists or researchers. There was an annual ship from the exploiting sheep ranch that occupied the entire island, which brought some supplies and took away the Island’s products. A Chilean naval vessel also visited periodically.

Luis was one of nine children, all but three of whom died either at birth or shortly after. Only first-born Martin (6 years Luis’s senior) and sister Delfina survived to adulthood, the former passing away in 1978 and the latter in 1940. Luis showed early promise as a singer and was devoted in particular to Church music. He was raised by his mother’s mother “Anastasia” Rengahopuhopu (1852-1942) who provided him with knowledge of the pre-missionary days on Rapanui. Rengahopuhopu was one of the inhabitants of Rapanui when it reached its lowest population of 110 persons in 1877. In his youth, he also was close to two aunts who were recognised as custodians of Rapanui musical heritage in the 1920s and 30s. Luis, then, knew old stories, songs,
chants, customs and beliefs although it was not until he was well into his maturity that he could tell outsiders about this material as access to the island was so controlled.

In time, Luis became “Kiko” and many visitors will know him only by this name. One interpretation of his island name is that he was fat, so his body had a lot of kiko ‘meat’. More likely is that it is a shortening of a great uncle’s name, Arakiko or Hercules in the Tahitian of the day. His Rapanui maternal relatives called him Orare, but few others knew or used that name. With age, following Tahitian custom, Kiko became Papa Kiko and the pejorative inference of his island name changed, becoming a reference to his “weight”, or stature, as a guardian of cultural heritage in the eyes of his juniors.

Kiko was active in the Rapanui Catholic church throughout his youth, working closely with the influential priest Father Sebastian Englert (1881-1969) and with prominent orators and community leaders of the 1930s and 40s. For a time Kiko was employed in the local Chilean state school to teach children the old songs and stories. Over the course of a decade, he built up an ensemble that was capable of performing a mix of traditional Rapanui and modern Tahiti-influenced songs that was sufficiently varied and substantive to prove popular with visiting and local audiences alike. This ensemble became the basis for performance tours to New Zealand in the 1970s and, later, participation in the quadrennial Festival of Pacific Arts.

Kiko Pate’s prominence in community music-making was conducive to his involvement in the work of outsiders. His reliable store of oral history informed the music research of eminent Chilean folklorist Margot Loyola (1988) and musicologist Ramón Campbell (1971); 64 of the songs transcribed in Campbell’s valuable music ethnography are attributed to Kiko. The first commercial recording of Rapanui music began in the 1970s, shortly after the establishment of regular commercial flights to the island. An uncountable number of tourists have also captured recordings of the Rapanui soundscape, particularly the Rapanui Mass where Kiko’s voice figured so prominently. Among the many anonymous productions of Easter Island Music that can be obtained commercially, Kiko performed for the recording projects of Claude Jannel (in 1974), Christos Clair-Vasiliadis (1976), Joaquin Bello (1995), Jörg Hertel (1995) and Ad Linkels (1996). To these, and to countless researchers of Rapanui history and culture, Kiko offered an insight into an ancient past. He saw no conflict in his mind between his fervent Catholic beliefs and the ideas of his ancestors.

Kiko Pate was an invaluable inspiration to the generations of Rapanui musicians who follow him. From the 1970s onwards, the preservation of Rapanui cultural heritage become an important aspect of the Island’s ongoing relationship with Chile, and music and dance therefore assumed new importance as vehicles for the expression of cultural identity. Kiko’s personal store of musical knowledge, together with his efforts educating Rapanui youth, provided many of these younger performers with ancient repertoire. His influence permeates the music of ensembles such as Kari Kari and Matato’a that now travel the world representing their Island (and, on occasion, Chile) at festivals and diplomatic engagements. In recognition of his service to the community, Kiko was honoured with the title of hijo ilustre by the Easter Island Municipal Government in his old age.
In 2002, we both spent considerable time on Rapanui and in the company of Kiko Pate. During our discussions, he revealed with great joy that he had seen a vision indicating that he was going to die. He seemed very happy at this knowledge and, when Grant asked him when he thought this might happen, he replied with the Spanish expression: “Cuando dios quiere”—when God wishes it. And so it has happened.

Grant McCall and Dan Bendrups
October 2008

*Anthropologist Grant McCall first met Kiko Pate in 1968 and worked closely with him during the ensuing 40 years. Ethnomusicologist Dan Bendrups writes on Rapanui music; he was a student and friend of Papa Kiko during his PhD fieldwork (2002-2004) and thereafter. In 2007, Dan Bendrups published a musical biography of Kiko Pate (The World of Music 49:1). The Rapanui Museum has a sound archive of traditional Rapanui music containing many of Kiko’s songs. The full references for works mentioned are:

Kimihia Te Mea Ngaro
Seek That Which Is Lost

Bruce Grandison Biggs was the most influential figure in academic Maori studies in the 20th century, and is widely recognised as one of the founders of modern Oceanic descriptive and historical linguistics. These 1992 Macmillan Brown Lectures the author draws upon his deep knowledge of Maori language and culture, and his studies in Oceanic linguistics to explore “the inner culture of the pre-19th century Maori”. This work is an exquisite example of Bruce Biggs’s unique and wide-ranging scholarship and the singular flavour of his expression.

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