Paolo Reina

"Ueber die Bewohner der Insel Rook, östlich von Neu-Guinea, nebst einigen Notizen über Neu-Guinea und benachbarte Inseln: Nach mündlichen Mittheilungen und schriftlichen Notizen des italienischen Missionars Herrn Paul Reina"

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Translated by Friedegard Tomasetti

On the Inhabitants of Rooke Island, East of New Guinea, together with some Notes on New Guinea and Neighbouring Islands: According to Oral Testimony and Written Accounts by the Italian Missionary, Mister Paul Reina

The Sultan of Ternate and Tidore [*sic*] claims authority over the northeast coast of the western part of New Guinea, to the east of the harbour of Duri (Doreri, Doerij on Dutch maps). The coast west of Duri is regarded as Dutch possession. The archipelagoes of Misoerij (*Vaart van Jobei*) and of Ouarido are part of the territory of the Sultan of Ternate.

The part of New Guinea to the west of Geelvink Bay has a population that is not purely Papuan but heavily mixed with Malayan blood. This is at least true for the population of the coast; the interior is [still] completely unknown. The genuine Papuans live east of the Geelvink Bay and are described as very savage, cruel and treacherous.

In the harbour of Duri one finds almost always Chinese junks conducting trade between there and the Moluccas. Each year the Sultan of Ternate sends a war *perahu* [vessel] to Duri demanding the tribute due to him. The place is also frequented by trading *perahu*s. Tribute is paid in slaves, wax, sago, tortoiseshell, trepang, shark fin and birds of paradise, which are also objects of trade. Most important is the trade in slaves, followed by the other items which are mentioned in the order of their importance. They are exchanged for glass ornaments, genuine pearls, tools, iron, weapons and mirrors. Also, Dutch ships are supposed to visit occasionally though irregularly. It is also said that Dutch ships sometimes visit, though only now-and-again and not regularly.

Staying in Duri, and even more so to the west of it, is supposed to be without any danger for Europeans. However, the land **[354]** around the MacCluer Gulf has a very bad reputation because of its climate and the natives.

Eight years ago the French Mission Society of the Marists founded a station on San Cristobal, one of the Solomon Islands; later on the mission [venture] was transferred to the Milanese Seminary of Foreign Missions. Subsequently the mission was relocated from San Cristobal to Woodlark Island; and, because of the unsuitable climate in all those places, finally to Rooke [Umboi] Island. The climate of Rooke was similarly unsuitable, so that the entire mission personnel was affected by fever ten days after their arrival. Several of them died from it, and the last two missionaries, Messrs Reina and Raimondi, battled against fever and hardship of various kinds for three and a half years. Eventually a ship was sent for them which brought them to Singapore a few days ago where they arrived with completely broken health but with zeal for their cause as strong as

ever. During the eight years of the operations of the [Catholic] Mission, ten of its members had fallen victim to murder or died of illnesses.

Mr Reina and his companions did not have the pleasure of converting even a single savage to Christianity. But they are convinced that their sojourn with the natives had not been completely without a moderating influence on their customs. Indeed, before too long they realized that attempts of conversion would be uncalled for, and that it would matter above all to begin turning the savages into "human beings" ("*Menschen*"). Since there seemed to be absolutely no chance to improve the mind of the adults, they tried to influence the children by reforming their mind (*Geist*) and heart to make them receptive to the teachings of Christianity, in the hope that a new generation would reward the tremendous sacrifices. The missionaries found that ignorance of the vernacular language was a great obstacle to their work: hence they diligently collected vocabulary, and they hope that the men who will continue their work will be more successful because of the foundation already prepared.

The missionaries travelled from Sydney to Rooke on a ship that had been specifically chartered for this purpose. En route they touched on some lesser known locations about which Mr Reina gives the following accounts.

The island Amakata (Duc d'York) between New Britain and New Ireland has a good harbour on the north coast where whalers occasionally anchor. The missionaries obtained pigs, coconut and taro from the natives. — The island of Buka is separated from Bougainville by a narrow passage. The natives of Buka are frequently visited by whalers and are less savage. Their boats are artistic in the style of **[355]** the Malayan *perahu*s and without the outriggers which are customary on the surrounding islands. — Treasury Island, south of Bougainville, has a substantial trade with Sydney, in particular in tortoiseshell. — The island of New Georgia, southeast of Bougainville, is visited annually by seven or eight Australian ships. — The island of [Santa] Ysabel, north-east of the previous one,

has an excellent harbour – *la baie de cent*[1] *navires* [*sic*] [Thousand Ships Bay] (Dumont d'Urville), with significant trade in tortoiseshell. — On San Cristobal the French missionaries stayed for one year; all of them were murdered.

The island of Woodlark is difficult to approach because it is surrounded by dangerous reefs, and entry is possible only from the northeast. On this island too, the Society lost a missionary through murder. The natives are very savage; they even admit to having murdered the crews of three ships that were stranded on their reef (in 1840, 1854, 1856). The island is rather sparsely populated. Woodlarkers have contact only with the natives of the Louisiade Archipelago, who visit the island once each year.

The natives of the Trobriand Islands are more used to contact with whalers and hence are less savage. One can obtain from them yam, taro and pigs.

A missionary and former ship captain, sketched a map of the harbour of Rooke; this map came into the possession of another missionary who was subsequently robbed and killed on a neighbouring island. A copy of it might be found in Hong Kong, in which case it should be sent to me.

To enter the harbour of Rooke a ship must approach it by keeping the small island [Hein Island?], located east of Lot[t]in [Tolokiwa] to its northwest. West of the small island which marks the entrance to the harbour, an active volcano rises out of the sea. It is a very steep hill and continuously smoking. No eruptions have been observed. Earthquakes are not rare on Rooke (i.e., two to three times a month). A very severe one occurred on the 17th of April 1857; the ground fractured at several places and formed fissures of three feet [about one metre] width, starting in the village [i.e., Nurua] and continuing into the sea. The missionaries had to abandon their wish to visit the volcano because no boat was willing to take them.

[1] This should be corrected to *mille*.

From the harbour one can see Cape [Mount?] Finisterre on the New Guinea mainland. Rooke is separated from New Britain by a navigable passage [i.e., Dampier Strait]. The ship that brought the missionaries from Sydney made its way through it **[356]** three times. However, one has to stay close to the coast of New Britain because dangerous coral reefs reach far out from Rooke into the sea.

About the natives of Rooke Island Mr Reina has penned down some notes from which the following is taken.

Religion

They do not believe in a divine being. However, they are firmly convinced of the existence of a devil (*Teufel*). He is usually called Marsaba, but he has many additional names of which the missionaries have counted with confidence at least ten. He kills pigs, devastates gardens, slays people whom he encounters in the forest, knocks at houses at night, causes illnesses, etc. The opinions were divided as to whether or not Marsaba has a body. Those who attributed a body to him thought of him as being very ugly. — It seems wicked people are also called *marsaba*.

Neither sacrifices nor prayers are offered to Marsaba, but blows. After a misfortune has occurred all people gather, shout, scold, howl, and beat the air with sticks to drive Marsaba away. Starting at the spot where he has made mischief they drive him into the sea; when arriving at the beach they redouble their noise and ‘parrying’ to chase Marsaba off the island. As a rule he then retreats into the sea or to the island of Lottin.

The house of the missionaries stood in the area dedicated to Marsaba. Women are not permitted to enter it. Here the public festivities are held. They commence in the evening, and the singing by which Marsaba is invoked lasts throughout the night; during day-time the people feast. Only men take part. Some of the food is sent to the women by their husbands and fathers. Such festivities are organized frequently in honor of different spirits each of whom has a distinct name.

On the day of the feast one or two men disguise themselves as grotesquely as possible (they even wanted to borrow poor Reina's cassock) and put on an ugly head carved of wood [a mask?]. Followed by all the men, they move with loud singing and dancing into the village, demanding the incised boys who have not yet been 'eaten' by Marsaba. The boys, crying and trembling in fear, are handed over and are required to crawl between the legs of the disguised men. Thereafter **[357]** the procession returns to the village, announcing that Marsaba has devoured the boys and would not disgorge them until pigs, taro and yam were given instead. All villagers contribute according to their means; the rich ones give pigs, and the poor taro, all of which is then eaten in the name of Marsaba.

Besides Marsaba another spirit, Nabeao, is held in considerable esteem. He seems to be a kind of patron of the village, and in his house (*barem*) the public meetings are held. Nabeao causes wind and storm and he devours shipwrecked people. If a boat runs aground on the beach of their island the natives always kill those shipwrecked so that Nabeao may not pursue them on to land. This custom also seems to be common on all neighbouring islands.

The natives have prayers for wind, weather, storm, sun, for fish, fruit, boats, sicknesses, and for the most abhorrent of actions. But their prayers are not comparable to ours. Rather they are "conjurations" ("*Besprechungen*") or formulae by means of which the power situated "in [the] abdomen" of certain individuals has an efficacy on those phenomena and actions. The natives do not

have prayers in our meaning of the word. When the missionaries gave the sick a beneficial medicine the natives were convinced that they had transferred a power from their abdomen on to the medicine. This power (*bar*) was considered good or evil – according to its efficacy. The missionaries would have liked to attribute the healing to the grace of God, but they could not penetrate so ancient and deeply rooted conceptions.

In the people's understanding of the term anyone can "pray," but some people have *bar* in their abdomen which is especially efficacious for particular situations. *Bar* does not pass from a father to his son.

The natives do not have *circumcisio* but practise a simple incision in the upper section of the foreskin. The incised young has to retire for a few days to the *barem.* A big feast takes place on the day the incision is performed, and another one when the incised leaves the *barem*. The people here actually call it already a big feast when twenty people assemble for eating, sitting on coconut fronds on the ground. With the incision a boy has gained the privilege to enter the *barem*; and for this occasion his father has to feast his friends with a pig and taro. However, the children of poor people are not incised, and the term "non-incised" is an insult equivalent to our term "*Lump*" (pauper, scoundrel). In addition to the reasons given here for incisions, an obscene one was also mentioned.

The following tradition about the origin of the people of Rooke is general circulation: a man named Pura landed on the island in a **[358]** boat of the kind as now in common use. He brought with him several children and many fruits. When landing, a few of the latter fell into the sea, and from them originated weeds, i.e., the useless plants. The remainder he planted, and the useful plants came up, such as coconut, banana, taro, etc. He taught his children the two languages spoken on the island, i.e., Nurua of the coastal people and Cubai that is spoken inland. Pura's children are the tribal ancestors of today's natives. Pura

himself left the island again. — According to some people Pura was a whiteman, but according to others he was black. On New Britain the whites are called *pura*.

Marriage

The bridegroom bestows some presents on to the parents of the bride, hence the expression "to buy a bride." If the proposal is accepted a feast is arranged; the bride goes to the house of her suitor and cooks the meal but does not stay overnight. A few months later a second feast is arranged, and the marriage is sealed.

When marrying, a son leaves the parental home and sets up his own. Hence the old people remain lonely and helpless. They work as long as they are able, and are scantily supported by children and other relatives who themselves usually do not have much. The work in house and garden is women's work.

If a man no longer wants to keep his wife he sends her back to her parents and takes another one. A woman not satisfied with her husband returns to her parental home or she joins the man who will be assigned for her [as husband]. Of the first scenario four cases were known and of the second only one. To divorce a wife is more common among newly married couples (of four to five years) when the wife is pregnant. Couples who are married for a longer time seldom divorce. Most people disapprove of divorce but nobody makes much fuss when it happens. The wife usually cries for half an hour and therewith the affair is settled.

Adultery occurs frequently; "*purchè non si vedono, è niente!*"[2] is written in the manuscript. If the culprits are caught a big ado is made, but there is never any violence between the men. In one incident the woman was beaten.

Although Mr Reina was frequently assured that polygamy is practised, he did not learn of a single actual case. An old chief who was friendly with him,

casually mentioned to him in a conversation that in the past he had two wives but killed one of them by spearing her because he preferred the other one. **[359]**

Birth

During a pregnancy, "prayers" (*bar*) are commonly said and, after it has been decided that the newborn child should be kept alive, the bosom of the [pregnant] woman is painted with red earth.

At the birth only women are present. The child is washed and kept in the house for several days. It will be given the name of a relative or a friend. There is no difference in names given to boys and girls. The children are breast-fed for two or more years.

For several days from the child's birth on, its father wears a bunch of fragrant herbs in his belt and carries his spear with the point dragging on the ground behind him when leaving the village. This is a custom to prevent the soul (*Geist*) of the child from following him into the forest.

But should the child be killed at birth none of the aforementioned happens. Instead, during the birth of the child the father digs a pit under the house which is above the ground on posts at about a man's height. After the child has been killed it is handed down to him and without much fuss hurriedly covered with earth.

[Concerning this custom] Mr Reina has penned down a conversation he had with a young man whom he depicts as one of the most intelligent.

R[eina]. How many children do you have? — None at all. — None at all? Did they die? — I had two but they are gone (the expression "I have killed them" was never used). — Poor children! Did they die just so? — No, they are gone. — But why did you kill them? — I did not do it, the women killed them. — How do the women do it? — As soon as the child is born the mother stuffs her apron (*Schamgurt*) into its mouth so that it can not cry, and wrings its neck. — And

[2] I.e., "Provided that one does not see it, it does not exist!" Equivalent to the English: "What the eye does not

your wife did that? Does she not love her children? — Abar (this is the wife's name) cried and did not have the courage to do it, but the other women did it without delay. — But why did you not protect your children, how could you let them be killed? — I was not there, I was in the garden; also, I am still too young to support children; when I am grown-up I will keep my children.

Young men defend themselves by saying that they are still too young, **[**mature] men simply state that such is the custom in Nurua and has always been. The reason, that by infanticide the parents are relieved of any obligation towards the child, may be the most important one but was always passed over in silence. I have never seen a father, not to mention a mother, blush over such an incident, and even if **[360]** they did not plainly say "I have killed the child because this is our custom," they certainly inwardly chuckled (*lachten innerlich)* about my naivety.

During the sojourn of the missionaries, sixteen newborn were killed and seven kept alive, not counting all those of whom the missionaries did not hear anything. Many women abort prior to birth and do not seem to feel guilty since they talk quite dispassionately about it.

Mr Reina told a woman how much Italian mothers love their children and how much they cry at their death. — We also cry when our children die, was the answer. — But if you weep over their death, why do you kill them at birth? — The woman roared with laughter and the entire group joined in.

The population is decreasing, although the race as such is fertile. One could see on the island the sites of several deserted villages, the few remaining inhabitants of which had joined together into one village.

Illness and Death

see, the heart does not grieve over."

A person falling ill leaves his house and goes to the beach where he remains lying in the fresh air until he is restored to good health. Native medication consists of fish broth and a decoction of a large-leafed plant which contains much slime. Also, they tie up the effected limbs with cords and force themselves to eat continuously. To treat rheumatism and localized inflammations from which they suffer a lot – because they bathe in the sea when they are tired and dripping with sweat – they lace themselves tightly and make incisions at the effected area with a sharp stone.

When a sick person no longer wants to take food he is considered an almost lost case. In this instance medication is stopped and magical treatment commences in an effort to snatch from Marsaba the soul (*Geist*) of the dying person, by singing, shouting and gesticulating. As soon as death occurs, the relatives start a dreadful howling, roll on the ground and force their way, one after the other, towards the corpse to weep. Finally the entire village joins in and everyone howls and shouts with all one's might.

The lamentation for the dead lasts about half a day, then the corpse is painted in various colours, wrapped in a mat and buried in front of the house of the deceased; thereafter a feast is arranged according to his means. When a poor person dies **[361]** only his widow mourns for him – the others laugh and mock the mourner who can not afford to give them a feast.

The grave is enclosed by a reed fence to secure the corpse from dogs and snakes. For a month a fire is kept during night so that the spirit (*Geist*) of the dead can warm his hands. Each morning and evening the wife and the mother of the deceased sing a dirge at the grave ("Oh my husband, oh my son, you have died!"). Four or five months later the fence is dismantled and thrown away far from the village. At this occasion another feast is arranged.

The souls of the wicked go into the forest and turn into *marsaba*; those of the good people also go into the forest but what they do is not known.

That the people's trust in their conjurer-magicians (*Beschwörer*) is not shaken despite the frequent cases of death, follows from their belief in sorcery (*Hexerei*): the magician has no influence over the sorcerized person. Hence the cases are rare that anyone is believed to have died a natural death, rather, most are supposed to die of sorcery. Superstitious means to identify the sorcerer do exist but are rarely used since the identification of the perpetrator would compel the relatives of the deceased to seek blood revenge, and the people prefer to avoid war.

Sometimes people are buried when still alive. When a sick person does not eat for a few days, has his eyes closed, does not reply when addressed and does not move, he is thought to be dead and will be buried. At least two such incidents have occurred with men in the prime of their lives. One of them objected when soil was thrown on to him and trodden down; the other man remained motionless. Wife and children stood by and wailed suitably. Mr Reina was not present when this happened but he is absolutely convinced of the reliability of the information. He gives as further confirmation of this custom another incident when he had the greatest difficulty in preventing a mother from burying her sick child who still remained alive for several days. The mother was stubborn: she grasped the hand of the small six-year old girl, lifted her up and shouted: "She stinks already!"

Domestic Life

Women have to do the domestic chores and light work in the garden. Men do the heavy work; they fell trees and fence the garden, since the place of residence is changed each year.[3]

[362] People go fishing between April and December. A fishing trip lasts usually two days and two nights. The catch is dried over fire and brought to the

[3] This requires clarification and probably the Italian original to resolve, Few Melanesian groups shift residences so frequently, even while engaged in the annual changes of slash and burn agriculture. See T. Bayliss-Smith and R. Feachem (eds.), *Subsistence and Survival: Rural Ecology in the Pacific*, London, 1977.

tribes living in the interior, who exchange it for taro which is not cultivated on the coast.

Boats are made of tree trunks which are hollowed. A balancing device (outrigger), fixed [to the hull] with two long cross-beams, floats on the water and prevents the boat from capsizing.

The making of nets is exclusively the work of men, particularly of old men who are no longer able to work in the garden. The twine is made from fibrous plants in the interior of the island.

The young men are only up to mischief and sit around all day. Often one sees a father carrying with difficulty a heavy load whilst his adolescent sons, who could help, decorate themselves with fragrant herbs and play around.

But all these activities occupy only a small part of the people's time. The larger part of the day is spent in idleness; then they squat around a fire, smoke and chat.

Food Items

Between January and August yam and taro are eaten, and between September and November the people live on taro which they obtain by trading (*kaufen*) in the mountains, and on almonds.[4] December is usually the month of hunger and entire families move into the forest and live on fruit which they allow to rot in the better seasons. Bananas are available throughout the year, but the fruit is not substantial enough [as staple]. Fish is eaten only sparingly. Pigs and tortoises are too scarce to be considered as daily food. Coconut also is so rare that it is regarded as a delicacy.

[4] *Mandeln*. Better translated as almond-like nuts, since almonds are not known in New Guinea.

The main meal of the day is taken around four o'clock in the afternoon; the leftovers serve as breakfast. — By the way, the people are steadfast in bearing their hunger.[5]

Mr Reina describes the character of the people of Nurua in the following terms: they are unrestrained, without sense of honour, devoted to lying, theft, hatred and resentment, and they are hypocritical, disloyal and slanderous.

Undetected crimes do not count as crimes. Somebody offered a pig, which he was going to steal, to the missionaries for purchase. When they explained to him that they would not buy any stolen goods, he tried to calm them with the assurance that nobody would see him.

[363] Had somebody been given a piece of iron, it frequently happened that the father went [to the missionaries] to slander his own son: "How could you make him a present when he has said this and that about you."

Not a single trait of true filial or parental love was noted by the missionaries during the three and a half years of their sojourn. The affection between an adolescent and a young girl never grows strong enough to tempt them to foolish actions, probably because of the quite general shameless and boundless slovenliness. The wife, in general so sensitive and considerate, never shows the slightest sign of being offended – even in the case of adultery of the husband. Of love, words were never spoken, just as little as it was practised.

The only virtuous feature noticed of the people of Nurua was their perfect outward self-control, which is so common that it should be listed as a trait of their character. Furthermore, a good sense of independence is apparent in all their actions, and thereupon the missionaries based some hope. The Nuruans have a code of behaviour, which is but followed only occasionally and superficially.

[5] Seasonal hunger is well enough in Melanesia.

There is nothing much to say about their system of government. Whoever works diligently, owns many fruit trees, is fond of power, flatters people and gives on and off a small feast, is a chief, i.e., he has some influence over others. But since many people are fond of power there are many chiefs who, however, have nothing to command about. Their entire influence is limited to their supporters but without making a difference to their mutual contacts' independence in word and deed (*ohne irgend einen Freiheit des gegenseitigen Umgangs in Handlung Unterschied in der oder Sprache zu veranlassen*). Public affairs are ordered by all people meeting together, and otherwise everyone may choose to do what he wants. At one point it was decided to attack the island of Lottin, but a small neighbouring village of Nurua did not want to take part. The Nuruans said they were afraid, but remained nevertheless good friends.

Once a string of beads was stolen from the grandson of a big chief. The thief was known, and his daughter-in-law wore the beads in public. The chief openly raged, but the thief kept the beads.

Nuruans' Opinion of the Whites

Whites were often asked if they came from the sky. People very much doubted that they were real human beings. One thought **[364]** of flattering them by expressing the view that they also would become human beings with a black skin (*curab*) by a lengthy sojourn in Nurua. In general, whites were not thought to be humans but other beings.

They asked whether the whites are born and will die, and whether they have wives etc. They had sufficient opportunity to observe that the whites are mortal since a French bishop, a priest and a catechist died in Nurua. The whites were not loved but feared.

To avoid encouraging the greed of the natives and to make them that the missionaries had no intentions to trade, they did not gives them any pieces of iron

during the first ten months of their sojourn. Presents were promised to those who, instead of killing their children, wanted to entrust them to the missionaries. It was for the natives completely incomprehensible how the missionaries could subsist for three months since they themselves have no idea of how to store provisions. They feast when there is a lot to eat and they go hungry when they have nothing.

Only once did an old chief bring some food to the missionaries; it was very little but he made the gift because he thought Mr Reina suffered from hunger.

However, nobody dared to lay hands on the missionaries, out of fear that a ship would come to avenge their death.

The people recount that 25 or 30 years ago (i.e., when an old chief's son, now about 40 years old, was a boy), a ship appeared from Long Island, situated between Rooke and New Guinea, and the natives attacked the crew wounding one of the whites on the eye. Hereupon the whites landed, burnt down a village and killed its inhabitants. This incident instilled in them a great fear of the whites and their ships, and probably one has to attribute to this the fact that the lives of the missionaries were not touched during the three and a half years of their sojourn. However, proposals to kill them were considered a few times at the people's assemblies (*Volksversammlungen*).[6]

The whites are also thought to cause the earthquakes, a notion that already circulated before the arrival of the missionaries. Mr Reina reports on the above-mentioned earthquake (of the 17th of April 1857) **ch date** that, a few minutes after sunset, a strong tremor was being felt in a north-south direction, which made the sea quiver; and a second, even stronger tremor occurred a few moments after, which **[365]** destroyed the chimney, threw the picture of the Mother of God from the altar and forced all windows open. A third tremor, equal in strength to the first, was the last one. The earth vibrations were horizontal. The earthquake had

[6] The last section and this sentence reveal Reina's interest in indigenous governance, because all the Milanese missionaries had been involved in freedom-fighting in 18??**ch** The choice of this term is probably negative,

hardly ceased when some of the most influential magicians arrived in haste [at the mission] and pressingly and urgently implored the missionaries to reveal their technique to them. Late in the same night another, a very weak, tremor occurred, an soon after the villagers arrived and enquired whether they could sleep in their own houses or should spend the night in the forest, if still more tremors might follow, etc. Although the people could see with their own eyes the damage done [at the mission], the missionaries did not succeed in convincing them about their misunderstanding; but at least they were reassured and returned to their houses.

however, because *Volksversammlungen* were associated with ultra-democratic or revolutionary action in Germany, and the choice may reflect middle-class conservatism in the translator.