

## Giovanni Mazzuconi

**“Extrait d’une lettre du P. Mazzuconi, prêtre de la Congrégation des Missions-Etrangères de Milan, à sa famille.” (Traduction de l’italien)  
*Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* [Lyon] 27 (1855): 367-71**

*Translated by Garry W. Trompf*

**Extract of a Letter of F[ather] Mazzuconi, Priest of the Congregation of the Foreign Missions of Milan, to his Family (translated from the Italian)**

**Rooke, 20 October, 1852**

My dear parents,

You would like to know what we have been doing this year in our mission: we have achieved (*nous avons fait*) much, because we have suffered a lot.<sup>1</sup> Our principal occupation, apart from suffering, has been to learn the language of our islanders in the intervals between almost continual bouts of fever. For this we have no other method than to go and sit amidst them, make them talk and then write down one word after the other as we were grasping them. On more than one occasion, the children of our savages have been our teachers. Very often, as I was dozing off after an attack of fever, they were coming to see me over the dividing walls of my log cabin, and after having looked at me for some time, they used to yell out to me, “Are you sick?” This unexpected questioning was startling me, and I would reply, “I am

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<sup>1</sup> This seems to be a very Catholic conceit: missionaries were prepared to suffer (even unto martyrdom) as an intentional *exemplum* of their faith. For a classic Melanesian case, see P. Sevenau [*sic*] (= Serveau), *A Life for a Mission*. Taipai, [1985], esp. pp. 55-76.

better and happy!” And so, with them outside and me within, we used to prolong our conversation.

[368] Concerning the language (*idiôme*) of the savages, I must correct a generally held error, which I myself shared, namely that these tongues (*langues*) are poor. Yes, they are poor with regard to the number of ideas they express, yet they convey ideas in a thousand, very diverse and singular ways. The nouns (*noms*) for different things are much more numerous than the verbs. Although we have already collected over 900 nouns, we still lack the most necessary ones. Moreover, we sometimes have to draw pictures. When I chat with the older children about the most important things, they suddenly interrupt and say, “Father, we immediately want to see what the horse looks like (*comment est fait*) in Europe, and then the ox (*boeuf*)!”<sup>2</sup> And I have to take a stick and draw a picture of a horse and an ox in their natural sizes in the sand. My savages are amazed about it, not knowing of any animal bigger than a wild boar. I say the biggest [*sic*] because we have here also snakes that are up to seven metres long. These are our least agreeable visitors and we have been surprised on two occasions to find them close to our bunks.

Still, these dangerous reptiles are not the things that should scare us most if God is helping us. Imagine a race of men in the heart of whom passions boil over very impetuously, and who know neither law, nor authority, nor punishment, and among whom anyone can kill the first person to come around (*le premier venu*) without a single voice being raised to tell him, “You have done the wrong thing!” [and a people] among whom fathers and mothers smother half of their infant children to death without showing a shade of the slightest remorse. Picture that, and you will understand the goodness God bestows on us [369] to inspire sentiments of respect for us, and even the desire to hear us.

Apropos the murder of infants, I would like to relate a detail that struck me during the first of our days on Rooke. We had learnt that in one of the huts nearest to us a baby had just been born. We asked with concern if the baby was doing well, and

everybody gave us that assurance. After some hours we became disturbed and went to find out what happened. Barely outside we found a woman from whom we asked information about the child, “Well,” she said, “well, but buried.” We did not yet know enough of the language and thought we might not have understood. We said, “How can it be well and buried?” To which she replied, “Look, there is its father, he just fills up the grave.” We approached the father. “Where is your son?” “I have buried him.” “Who killed him?” “Myself and his mother; and then I carried him outside, I hollowed out the sand and buried him. Do you do it like that in Europe?” We went away with such a heavy heart that we could not speak. Later we knew that it was the custom to kill the first-born. After the first-born, one keeps one, then smothers the next, and so on alternatively. The woman whom we had questioned, in telling us that the child was well, meant by that, even though he was dead, he did not have flaws. They say “I have buried it” instead of “I have killed it,” to look better in the eyes of others and to make them understand that, unlike their neighbours, they inter their infants and do not eat them.

I should add that these unhappy islanders are eager to hear us, but do not believe that this [370] is out of a religious impulse; no, they are not capable of such. Still, they are enchanted to hear us talk about our great God, the creation of the world, hell, paradise...<sup>3</sup> All this appears to them a very beautiful story that captivates them and to which they pay homage as if it were true. Yet, look at the misery and thoughtlessness of these poor souls (*esprits*)! Struck by the idea that, just as there is only one sun to light up our universe, there is only one God who creates and rules all, they go about repeating among themselves, “There is only one God! There is only one God!” and yet they then continue to worship their nameless and countless spirits (*génies*).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Implicit in this phrase is also the simple question as to how horses and cattle came about, neither of which were brought by the missionaries.

<sup>3</sup> Omission in the French version of the text.

<sup>4</sup> In all likelihood, of course, the Rooke islanders did remember their recent dead (cf. A. Pomponio, *Seagulls Don't Fly into the Bush: Cultural Identity and Development in Melanesia* (Wadsworth Modern Anthropology Library), Belmont, Ca., 1992, esp. pp. 83-91 on the Mandok, on an islet off

One day I was standing still on the seashore, looking at a big rock being constantly soaked by the waves. The good Father Frémont<sup>5</sup> approached me and seeing me dreamy asked, “Do you want to make this stone intelligent?” “No,” I replied, smiling. “You do, however,” he retorted, “want to put religion, morality and grace into the hearts of these savages? Isn’t that a more difficult work, since they have the power to resist it?”<sup>6</sup> “Without doubt, but with God’s help we will achieve even what seems impossible.” Also, since I am in the midst of my unhappy children,<sup>7</sup> I have not been able to offer a single prayer without them being included in it. Help me, my own dear parents; consider that they know you all already by your names, and that they incessantly ask me, “Did you still have your father and mother?” “Yes, they are in Italy.” “Did they cry when you left?” “Oh, most surely; but they were comforted, because they knew that I was coming to you.” “And have you any brothers and sisters?” “Yes, I have nine, who are all still living, we do not [371] kill them!” There arises a general shriek of astonishment, and it is then necessary for me to say all your<sup>8</sup> names. One day, as I was pronouncing the name of my little brother Cherub[in]o,<sup>9</sup> a young adolescent butted in, “I would also like to be called Cherub[in]o.” So you, [my brother], who was truly called by this name, remember to pray for this naughty little savage! The poor child! I am obliged sometimes to put on a severe face so as to handle his naughtiness; then he slips near me, looking me in the eyes and says, “It is me who is Cherub[in]o.” I have to admit that at his name I lose my sternness, and I cannot stop myself from smiling at him.

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the opposite and southern end of Umboi). The context of the missionary statement, however, refers to recognition of the importance of the collective dead, who were typically more powerful for Melanesians.

<sup>5</sup> For Jean-Pierre Frémont, see Laracy, *Marists and Melanesians*, Canberra, 1976, ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> This is a very interesting early passage about the vulnerability (and naivety) of missionaries at the Melanesian missionary frontier: they could not only be resisted by arms, as in the case of Marists before them (see Laracy, “The ‘Martyrs’,” loc. cit.: 189-202, but also resisted by disinterest in the Christian message and confidence in their own traditions.

<sup>7</sup> The child-savage analogy came naturally, as it was also accepted in the sociological discourse of the time; cf., e.g. Auguste Comte, see Trompf, “‘Essays on Education’ and the Young Herbert Spencer,” in R.J.W. Selleck (ed.), *Melbourne Studies in Education 1971*, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 226-7.

<sup>8</sup> I.e., of Mazzuconi’s family, to whom he wrote this letter.

<sup>9</sup> I.e., supposing the Italian was used, for Cherub.

Oh, when will he truly enter into our Family? When might he give himself, with baptism, the right to carry the beautiful name he has taken?

There are three great marvels that Rooke shows with pride for the admiration of foreigners: the *whitemen*, the *pat*, and the *nakan*. The *whitemen*, you will already guess, are the missionaries; the *pat* is a small statue of the Holy Virgin. On this matter let me tell you that if I had some religious objects, sculptured or painted, I would have material for the most efficacious preaching. The *nakan* is a small box containing a mechanism which plays some tunes. Imagine how our savages are captivated, holding their breath when they heard the first suave notes from the musical instrument, they who are so passionate towards all kinds of music!<sup>10</sup>

Mazzuconi, *Miss[ionnaire] ap[ostolique]*

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<sup>10</sup> A number of comments can be made here, first about the Catholic policy of taking fascinating instruments into the field (especially encouraged by Athanasius Kircher and his legendary Jesuit museum in Rome) (see E. Lo Sardo (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher: Il museo del mondo*, Rome, 2001), and the genuine interest in novelties by so-called ‘savages’ (what a pity Herbert Spencer did not read this passage! Cf. Spencer’s *An Autobiography*, London, 1904, vol. 1, pp. 476).