

Rooke Island or Umboi

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“Extrait d’une notice sur l’Île de Rook, par le P. Ambrosoli, prêtre de la Congrégation des Missions-Etrangères de Milan.” (Traduction de l’italien)

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Translated by Garry W. Trompf

Extract from a Report on the Island of Rooke, by F[ather] Ambrosoli, Priest of the Congregation of the Foreign Missions of Milan (translated from the Italian)

The Island of Rooke,¹ not far from New Guinea whose mountains can be seen from here, was without doubt one of the first islands [of Melanesia in Oceania] to be visited by Europeans. The Spaniard Minez passed by it in 1537.² Standing at 145° east longitude and 5° south latitude, it is seven leagues (15.5 km)³ long by two (8.5 km) wide. There are about 60 hamlets scattered over the island, with each having a hundred inhabitants, and the whole making 6-7,000 persons. This population seems to belong to three different races, with each having its own language. What is most peculiar is that one finds here many Hebrew names and customs, as for example

¹ Rooke Island (named after Sir George Rooke by explorer William Dampier) is usually rendered in French without an e (see Introduction to the three texts above by F. Tomasetti). The modern name for Rooke Island is Umboi.

² For serious doubts as to the likelihood of an explorer of that name sighting Rooke, see the above Introduction to the three texts of the Milanese missionaries on this island.

[364] circumcision and purification. Our islanders divide their months according to three phases of the moon – the new, full and waning. They count the day from one evening to the other, and they divide it into five parts – early morning, morning, midday, ebb of day, late.⁴

There are special priests for gardening times, for voyaging, and for sicknesses. Diseases come, according to them, from certain evil spirits called *marcabes*, who inhabit the forests, eat wild pigs and work their ways at night into houses from whence they carry off the souls of the living so that they pine away. Relatives⁵ therefore hasten to call one of their medicine men, so that he will pursue the noxious spirit (*génie*), and through certain contortions seize back the removed soul and restore it to the poor sick person.⁶ If he succeeds the healing is certain; otherwise death occurs. When a savage dies, the whole village ceases work: they shed tears around the hut of the deceased, whose corpse is painted red, and who, wrapped in matting, is interred in a shallow grave. Those who have done something towards the internment go afterwards immediately to purify themselves in the sea. Our islanders generally have a great respect for the dead. They believe that their souls proceed to some place⁷ to eat wild pig, and that for them is paradise. Misfortune, however, befalls those who violate burial grounds! They would be regarded as culpable of sorcery (*sortilège*; ‘evil spell’), and killed when surprised in this act (*dans cette opération*).⁸ It is this that has prevented us from gathering the remains of

³ Assuming that the author is using the modern Italian *lega*.

⁴ Ambrosoli apparently also sees parallels here with Hebraic procedures, because the Jewish Sabbath is counted from late Friday to Saturday nightfall.

⁵ The close kin of affected persons are presumably meant.

⁶ The *contorsions* suggest an altered state, and perhaps we have here the first known reference to a form of Melanesian shamanism.

⁷ *Quelque part* is exasperatingly vague, yet the spirit place as somewhat corresponding to the known order but with much greater possibilities, is hardly an atypical Melanesian conception. Consider, e.g., Trompf, *Melanesian Religion and Christianity* (Melanesian Mission Studies, 4), Goroka, 2008, p. 21.

⁸ In Melanesian traditional beliefs, interference with the dead would be most commonly seen as the act of a sorcerer (usually of an enemy clan), who would be killed if caught trying to disinter, manipulate or even devour the flesh of a recently deceased person. In some cultures, anyone ‘discovered’ to be practising sorcery would be killed anyway. See, e.g., F. Tomasetti, *Traditionen und Christentum im Chimbu-Gebiet Neuguineas: Beobachtungen in der lutherischen Gemeinde*

Monseigneur Collomb and Father Villien, who both died three months after their arrival here, and for whom we would wish to provide a more appropriate sepulchre.⁹

The islanders are not as black as those of some neighbouring islands; they are not much darker [365] than the peasants of Italy after they have worked during summertime. Their stature is strong and robust; they present themselves at first sight as courageous and proud but in reality they are timid and fearful. The cannibalism that reigns along the coasts of New Guinea is abhorrent to the Rooke islanders; they do not steal like they do on Woodlark or San Cristobal,¹⁰ where there are only ‘professional thieves.’ Quarreling is rare, and they do not hold any resentment for insults.¹¹ When the natives sense they are being overcome by anger, they quickly run to cut down a large plant, after which their indignation has passed, and they return calmed down as if nothing had happened. Indeed they are also in the habit of exchanging services and help each other in their needs. But what is shocking is the horrible and incredible barbarity of fathers and mothers who kill some of their children in order not to have to care for them. This is an issue in the village of Nurna, where we reside, where one can count no less than 55 households (*ménages*) and there not yet 200 inhabitants.¹² Basic advantage (*l'intérêt*) is the sole motive of these unions: a woman hopes that, through fishing, hunting and trade, her husband will provide her in abundance; while for his part the husband wants to return to his hut to find everything well prepared. Divorce is frequent among them, above all among the younger ones. The most common reason is that the wife does not know how to satisfy her spouse’s taste, or his insatiable greed for special food. As food

Pare (Arbeiten aus dem Seminar für Völkerkunde der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, 6), Wiesbaden, 1976, p. 57.

⁹ This is a fascinating snippet; for missionaries to return to the place of the dead and to ‘improve’ cemeteries could bring them under serious suspicion (see previous note). On Msgr Jean George Collomb and Fr Grégoire Villien, see H. Laracy, “Roman Catholic ‘Martyrs’ in the South Pacific, 1841-55,” *Journal of Religious History* 9, 2 (1976): 200.

¹⁰ For a synopsis of the Catholic missions in the wider area, see the footnote under the Reina extract in this collection, n. **ch**.

¹¹ This and what follows are interesting pieces of information, probably meant to refer to disputes and ill-feeling internal to hamlets or clans. If wounds not leading to death are included here, note that they are more typical of internal than inter-tribal conflict.

¹² Possibly Nurua? **Ch Reina**

they prefer wild pig, a type of dog they take great care to see reproducing, tortoises, and various species of fish.

In Nurna much trading is done: the people from the mountains bring tobacco and [366] taro, and in exchange are given fish and metal. During the bad [i.e., dry] season much hard work goes into constructing boats and canoes, which are sold to the New Guinea mainland and to New Britain in order to get bows, spears, cooking pots, and cutting tools...¹³ Here the products of cultivation are taro, yam and diverse types of bananas. In the forest one can easily find almonds, oranges and lemons, but the natives (*naturels*) hold a superstition preventing them from touching such fruit, for fear of being poisoned.¹⁴

We have planted near our cabin a grapevine and a fig tree, and various other shrubs brought from Sydney; but they have not grown well – great care is needed to counteract the influence of the insalubrious air of these islands. The heat is never excessive, however, for it never gets above 25^o Réaumur (31^o C).¹⁵ or below 18-20^o (25^o C) at night. Thanks to the breezes that continually flow, we find little difference between the temperature of Rooke and that of Milan.

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

¹³ Omission is indicated in the French version. With reference to tobacco, we cannot be certain it is local or introduced. C. Schmitz (*Historische Probleme in Nordost-Neuguinea: Huon-Halbinsel* (Studien zur Kulturkunde, 16), Wiesbaden, 1960, pp. 148-9) gives the impression, using N.N. Miklouho-Maclay and this very article herewith translated (with the Francophone name Ambroise), that it was American, traded from the Umboi mountain people. Cf. Miklouho-Maclay, “List of Plants in Use by the Natives of the Maclay-Coast, New Guinea,” *The Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 10 (1885): 352.

¹⁴ Certain edible fruits, hardly these named in particular (because they are not traditional to Melanesia) are referred to here, and these may not have been consumed because taboos pertained to them. On almonds, see above in the Introduction. **ch**

¹⁵ For background, note that the French Republic accepted the Celsius scale for the metric system over the Réaumur measurements in 1795, and the emergent French empire under Napoleon Bonaparte exported metric usages (in Italy by 1797). That the Congregation still held on to an older form of measurement probably has to do with keeping up conventions within the (transnational) Catholic church.