## IN SEARCH OF "MEN OF NATURE": PAUL WIRZ'S PHOTOGRAPHY IN NEW GUINEA, 1916–1955

Andrea E. Schmidt Freiburg, Germany

Between 1916 and 1955 the Swiss anthropologist and collector Paul Wirz (1892-1955) took several thousand photographs during his research trips to New Guinea, where he stayed with the Marind-anim of the south coast, at Lake Sentani, in the highlands with the Western Dani and the Enga, at the Papuan Gulf (Gogodala), and in the Sepik and Maprik areas. For his black-and-white-dominated photography Wirz used first gelatin dry-plate technology, later roll film. The photographs served as illustrations for his numerous publications, and, sometimes hand-colored, as lantern slides for his lectures. In content, Wirz believed that photography should above all document and conserve cultural aspects of the life of "men of nature," that is, societies that were barely influenced by Western culture, colonialism, and missionary work. He thus focused on portraits of individuals and groups to fix anthropological and ethnograpical information —such as physique, decoration, clothing—and on visible socioreligious signs, because for him the traditional religious structure formed the foundation of culture. Being a combination of both, shots of the dema actors of the Marind-anim became his best known photographs.

THE SWISS ANTHROPOLOGIST AND COLLECTOR PAUL WIRZ (1892–1955) spent most of his lifetime on the move: he traveled in Southeast Asia and Melanesia, various parts of Africa and Asia, the Caribbean, and southern Europe (Figure 1). Within the scope of several research trips, he stayed altogether six and a half years in different areas of the island of New Guinea. His scientific research there established his reputation as an anthropologist. No matter how limited his luggage had to be, he always had his photographic equipment with him. His travels and expeditions worldwide pro-

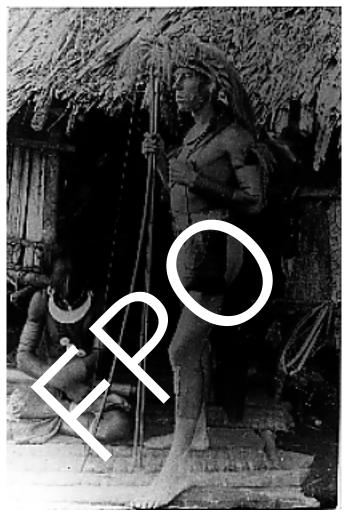


FIGURE 1. Paul Wirz at the Papuan Gulf. Photographer unknown, 1930, vintage print. (From the private collection of Dadi Wirz)

duced approximately 10,000 photographs, about one-third from New Guinea. The largest collection is now housed in the photographic archive of the Museum of Cultures in Basel, Switzerland; another collection is located at his family home in Reinach; and some hundred prints are distributed among different museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.  $^3$ 

The following investigation explores how Wirz's personal image of the Pacific, in this case of New Guinea, is reflected in his extensive photographic work. Apart from their use today for anthropological and ethnohistorical purposes, his photographs also convey his philosophy of life and sometimes his life's story.

Although photography was an inherent element of his anthropological work, Wirz never discussed the importance of this visual medium to his studies, even though he used it from the beginning of his research in 1915, nor did he discuss filmmaking, which he added ten years later. He was not trained as a photographer or in photographic methods. He never bothered to question the method or use of photography and gave no indication of whether he followed special instructions in his photographic work. In his field diaries and publications he referred only to the development of certain special shots, for example, because they were difficult to take. Even when reporting that he brought photographs back into the field, he never referred to them as a research medium for his work. Therefore, my analysis of his photographic imaging of the Pacific required the coupling of his photographic material with his academic background and personal biography and with the spirit of the times, the technical equipment, and the working conditions.<sup>4</sup> By means of this analysis, it was possible to establish several phases corresponding to his personal and academic motivations and intentions, on the one hand, and the technique of photography, on the other. Turning up throughout his work were "nature" and "naturalness," the keywords of his imaging, reflected in his photographs.

# Photographic Technology and Practice

The photographs of Wirz's numerous travels document well the technical changes in photography during the four decades of his research work: at first he had to cope with the limitations of the early techniques, later with the possibilities of new developments. Wirz mentioned as little about his technical equipment as he did about his purpose and method. Occasionally he remarked on the trade names of his cameras. During travels to New Guinea up to the early 1930s, he used a hand and tripod camera for gelatin dry-plate technology with glass-plate negatives of  $9\times12$  cm. and  $13\times18$  cm.<sup>5</sup> From the mid-thirties on he used a roll-film camera, a two-eyed Rolleiflex for  $6\times6$  cm. negatives or a 35 mm. camera, usually a Leica, and  $24\times36$  mm. film negatives. Black-and-white photography was the standard, but some lantern slides made for lectures on his early expeditions were hand-colored. In the 1950s Wirz also used color film.

How Wirz dealt with these technical changes is evident in his photo-

graphs. The early equipment did not allow for spontaneous pictures, as the complex procedures and heavy equipment forced him to consider every shot carefully. Later, lightweight equipment (cameras and negatives) and easier operation made spontaneous and numerous pictures possible, but he ran the risk of recording events and sites with only superficial snapshots.

Consideration of Wirz's motives and photographic practice leads to several conclusions. First, with the help of photography he tried to document and conserve cultural aspects to suspend time: time, in his opinion, would inevitably bring the disappearance of native cultures and their different, in comparison to Western culture, "natural" ways of life that were his main field of interest. Photography's second use was to facilitate his ethnographic work: he used pictures to document his observations and as supplements to his cultural descriptions, particularly if they were difficult to formulate, like the attributes of the different age groups of the Marind-anim; and photographs were useful when time for data collection was short. Photographs had a third use as record for physical anthropology, which was one of Wirz's scientific interests in the early years of his work.<sup>6</sup> In the last part of his working life, for example on his field trips to eastern New Guinea in the 1950s, photography also formed a kind of compensation for stationary field research.

Another aspect of photography relevant to Wirz was the illustration of his numerous scientific and nonscientific publications. In addition, he used lantern slides in lectures he gave in Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Wirz never had permanent employment in his profession. He joined the Netherlands Central New Guinea Expedition in 1921 and prepared a catalog for the Museum of Ethnography in Batavia (Jakarta) two years later. For a period of three semesters, between 1928 and 1932, he gave lectures at the University of Basel. Otherwise, he depended on publications and public lectures to disseminate his work and relied on attractive visual material for their success. For this reason too it was important for Wirz to find subjects that had never been photographed before: unique and unusual shots not only enhanced his reputation as an anthropologist, but also attracted attention to his publications (Wirz 1933:170).

Wirz's method of work can be reconstructed only with the help of scattered remarks from his publications and unpublished material. It seems that his practice was to obtain permission to photograph by payment or reward in the form of tobacco or trade goods. Some of his remarks reveal that, at least in the beginning of his research, not everyone posed voluntarily before his camera (Wirz 1928b:91).

In the rare case that he could not personally take a picture of an important subject, he fell back on material borrowed from other photographers, for example, missionaries or travelers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Destinations in New Guinea**

Wirz did his first scientific research in the former Netherlands New Guinea, now Irian Jaya: in 1916–1919 he worked with the Marind-anim of the south coast; he stayed twice at Lake Sentani, in 1921 and 1926; and in 1921 he joined the Central New Guinea Expedition of the Netherlands colonial government to the Western Dani. He then concentrated on the eastern part of the island, now Papua New Guinea: in 1930 he did research in the Papuan Gulf area, with the Gogodara (Gogodala) among others; in 1949–1950 he traveled in the highlands and on the Sepik River; he repeated these travels in 1952–1953 and went for the first time to the Maprik region; he returned there one year later and died during this stay. He was buried in Wewak on the north coast of Papua New Guinea.

Wirz's choice of New Guinea for his first research was linked to his general motivation to choose anthropology as his profession after giving up teacher training in the natural sciences. He expected a self-determined, independent, interesting, exotic, and romantic life that would give him the opportunity to travel and to be in a "natural" and warm environment together with natives that were still "Naturmenschen"—"men of nature." New Guinea seemed to be an ideal destination where most peoples were considered to be barely influenced by Western culture, missionary work, and colonialism.

He was influenced by the theory of evolution during his first year of university study in 1914–1915 in Zurich, where Professor Otto Schlaginhaufen taught physical anthropology. This training fit with his idea to study yet unknown peoples that might represent early stages of mankind. These peoples were chiefly expected to be found in New Guinea, exemplified by the Marind-anim, who were reported to be former headhunters and cannibals.

## The Marind-anim

The photographs Wirz took during his first scientific research with the Marind-anim are probably his best known. Many of them are included in his two-volume monograph on the Marind-anim, a standard work concerning this culture (Wirz 1922, 1925a), in a popular book about his stay with the Marind-anim (Wirz 1928b), and in shorter articles (Wirz 1925b, 1928c).

For his doctorate, based on research with the Marind-anim, Wirz tried to relate data he collected to the classical anthropology he had studied. He had the classical monographs in mind when he recorded aspects of Marind-anim culture: environment, daily and family life, methods of agriculture, households and crafts, games and religion. Corresponding to his idea of a complete monograph, Wirz tried to cover these topics in his photographs too.<sup>11</sup>

But this scope was modified by experiences and opportunities in New Guinea and other special interests he pursued.

Since this early field research in New Guinea, it is clear that Wirz's only interest was native cultures in their "natural" state. His cultural pessimism led him to lament that the "savages" and their traditional and natural way of living were becoming irretrievably lost. However, cultural change and acculturation were rarely evident in his research and photographs. His photographs concentrate on the alleged original state of the native cultures. 12

Scenic views are numerous in Wirz's Marind-anim photographs, particularly anthropogeographic shots and flora. Because of the techniques of photography at that time, shots of fauna are rare. The limitations of static photography also forced him to arrange situations in front of the camera, for example, to sketch the daily life in the settlements or the work routine in households, agriculture, and craft. Another focus of the Marind-anim pictures was portraits: by portraying individuals and groups, Wirz tried to fix anthropological and ethnographical information, such as physique, decoration, or clothing (Figure 2).

Besides portraits with ethnographic information, Wirz took numerous physical anthropological pictures of the Marind-anim. Within the scope of his first field research with the group, these pictures complemented his anthropological observations following the methodology of classical anthropology. On later occasions, anthropometric and physical anthropological portraits substituted for deeper anthropological fieldwork. Their use was forced on him by lack of time, limited knowledge of a group's language, and limited opportunities for extended fieldwork and observation. He also collected physical anthropological data, including photographs, when an ethnic group had already been influenced deeply and so was no longer living "naturally" (Wirz 1925c: plate 7, picts. 1–5). In such cases Wirz collected physical data at least as material for his special interest in migration theories concerning New Guinea. His photographs for this purpose were not anthropometric photographs (relying on visual measuring instruments) and could not have been used for subsequent measurement. Even if Wirz was aware of the demands of physical and anthropological photography—if possible the human subject was to be naked and photographed from different sides (front, back, side)—his photographs were above all physiognomical. He designated these portraits as "Typen-Photographie," character-type photographs (Figure 3). The foundations for his physical anthropological photography probably were laid by Otto Schlaginhaufen, who esteemed photography as a method for reproduction and a complement to measurements (Schlaginhaufen 1915), and by Rudolf Martin (1914), though Wirz mentioned neither man's works in this connection in his own publications.

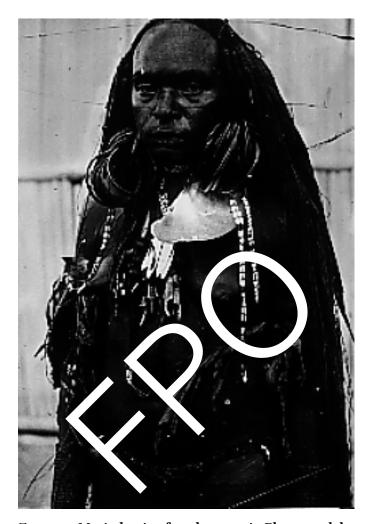


FIGURE 2. Marind-anim, female portrait. Photograph by Paul Wirz, 1916–1919, 9 × 12 cm. colored lantern slide. (From the private collection of Dadi Wirz. Published in Wirz 1922, plate 18, ill. 2: "Iwåg von Domandéh mit der Mumbre-majub-Haartracht," and in Wirz 1928b, ill. 25: "Festlich geschmückte Iwåg von Domandeh. Die Frisur besteht wiederum aus langen Baststreifen von Mumbre [Hisbiscus taliacaeus], die zu dünnen Strängen vereinigt und an den Haarzöpfen befestigt sind")

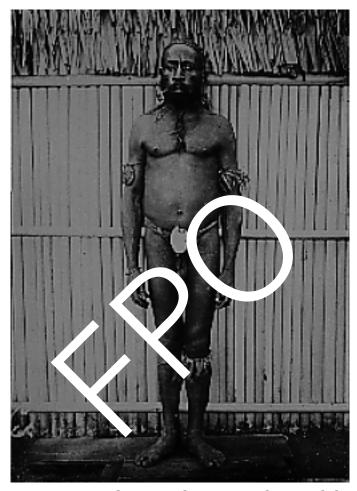


FIGURE 3. Marind-anim, male portrait. Photograph by Paul Wirz, 1916–1919 or 1922, 9 × 12 cm. glass-plate negative. (Museum der Kulturen, Basel, [F] Vb 35 068; copyright Dadi Wirz)

A second focus of Wirz's Marind-anim photographs was on visible socioreligious signs. For him traditional religious structures formed the foundations of culture. Throughout his scientific research Wirz was interested in socioreligious structures and aspects of culture, and he was a great opponent of missionary work. Missions to him meant the destruction of the basis of traditional, "natural" societies. By attending festivities of the Marind-anim that were organized by the colonial government, Wirz had outstanding opportunities to get insights into a complex aspect of Marind-anim culture, the field of the "dema," and to follow the production of its different costumes. The data collected and the photographs taken during these festivities laid the foundation for Wirz's reputation as an anthropologist and photographer. Today their artificial construction needs to be taken into account, as those festivities not only were arranged by the colonial government but also traditionally were celebrated at night or in the early morning. Celebrating them in the daytime made photographic documentation possible (Wirz 1928b:229–230; for published examples, see Wirz 1925a, 1925b, 1928b, 1928c, 1951).

# From Lake Sentani to the Gogodara

The Marind-anim were the exotic "savages" Wirz had wanted, and he tried to create this image in his photographs and publications (1928b). From Lake Sentani he gave rise to the opposite image, that of an exotic "paradise," a South Sea Eden. He constructed an image of the lovable primitive, living in nature and naturalness, that reflected his personal sense of well-being during his fieldwork (Wirz 1929a). There too Wirz tried to document the traditional culture monographically (1928a, 1933–1934). And his choice of subjects, for example, palm trees in the foreground of environmental pictures, created a special "paradise" (Figure 4). Still unaffected by missionary work and hardly by colonial changes, the people of Lake Sentani corresponded closely to Wirz's image of "men of nature." They were friendly, diligent, and happy people that, important to Wirz, still held to their religious traditions.

The situation seems different during his participation in the Central New Guinea Expedition of 1921. He joined with enthusiasm because of the opportunity to be among the first Europeans to contact several ethnic groups still living naturally, but his limited output of pictures reflects the circumstances of this fieldwork. A difficult language situation, lack of time, and serious illness made his research difficult. Therefore, anthropogeographic photographs and scenic views dominate his pictures from the highlands of Irian Jaya. His portraits often had a coincidental character that reflected his limited research opportunities (Wirz 1924). Despite reduced opportunities, though, Wirz again tried to document every religious sign that he noticed.

Wirz had so far always concentrated on a single ethnic group in his research and his photographs, but after about ten years of anthropological work, a turning point can be noticed. He became more interested in studying a larger area in a more general way, rather than staying for an extended

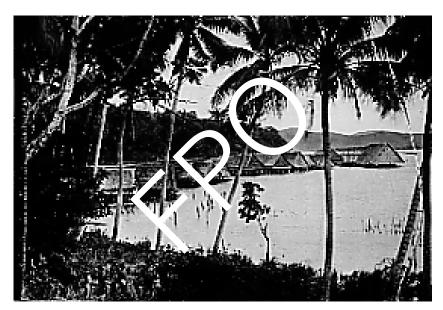


FIGURE 4. View of Saboiboi, Lake Sentani. Photograph by Paul Wirz, 1921 or 1926, 9 × 12 cm. colored lantern slide. (From the private collection of Dadi Wirz. Published in Wirz 1929a, ill. 7, and in Wirz 1933–1934, p. 16: "Blick auf Saboiboi am Sentanisee")

period with one group. This became obvious during his visit to the Papuan Gulf in 1930 (Wirz 1934a). Wirz's photographs from this journey seem to rely on chance encounters he made during his travels in the gulf area. His pictures rarely reflect a coherent research agenda, as had been evident in photographs from the Marind-anim, Lake Sentani, and the Western Highlands. Religious signs formed his sole special area of interest, but here too Wirz's preferences began to change: stationary scientific research moved to secondary importance in comparison to the collection of objects.

Only during his stay with the Gogodara did Wirz develop a discernable coherence in his scientific research, and this is reflected in the pictures he took (1934b). With the Gogodara he again found a "naturally living" ethnic group that he considered unaffected by missionary work and colonial influence, and he felt happy in their company. Beyond the mere collection of objects he tried to gain deeper insight and to describe their culture monographically, as he had before with the Marind-anim and the people from Lake Sentani. Again his special interest in socioreligious aspects of culture

resurfaced. In contrast to his photographs of the people of Lake Sentani, where his motivation was to create a special notion by selective choice of subjects, with the Gogodara he now selected particular aesthetic arrangements. The composition of his photographs became thoroughly influenced by a personal philosophy of life that had changed in the meanwhile.

By the end of the 1920s, Wirz had joined the movements of *Lebensre-form* (life reform) and *Nacktkultur* or *Freikörperkultur* (nudism), which were then very popular in parts of Swiss and German society. In these movements he hoped to meet like-minded people to whom nature and naturalness played the important role he had always tried to give them in his life. In the following years, life reform and nudism had a great effect not only on his personal life, but also on his research and photographic work.<sup>13</sup> Among other things he now tried to document the relaxed ways of dealing with the body in native societies. He therefore transferred typical poses from life reformers and nudists to his field photographs, and to stress his idealized image of naturally living people, he also introduced contre-jour shots in his photography (Figure 5).<sup>14</sup> Wirz wanted to participate in the "naturalness" of the natives, because it promised him a kind of freedom he could never experience or live in his own society (1933) (see Figure 1).

## To the Eastern Highlands, Sepik, and Maprik

After his journey to the Papuan Gulf in 1930, Paul Wirz did not visit New Guinea for a period of nearly twenty years. During this periord a second turning point in his research work and photography can be noted. Visiting the Eastern Highlands and the Sepik area several times after 1949, he only passed through the region (Wirz 1954b). He stayed no longer than a few days in any one place, or for some weeks, for example, in the Enga region (Wirz 1952c), and the photographs of his travels in the eastern part of New Guinea seem to rely on chance. Consequently, his photographic output resembles the typical outdoor shots taken by tourists and travelers more than ethnographic insights into indigenous societies. Photography as working material became a substitute for the on-site presence of the scientist. 15 Even if Wirz's specific field of interest, the socioreligious aspects of culture, was documented in photographs of ritual houses, his main intention in traveling had changed. Collecting objects had become more important than scientific field research, because the unaffected men of nature he had tried to trace were, he thought, extinct; now it was of higher importance to keep what was left of their material culture before this too was lost (Wirz 1954a, 1959). As a result, photography was now used in the field for the documentation of objects (Wirz 1952a, 1952b, 1952d, 1954a).

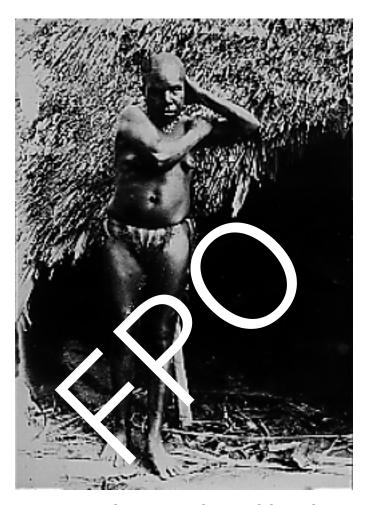


FIGURE 5. Gogodara woman. Photograph by Paul Wirz, 1930,  $9 \times 12$  cm. glass-plate negative. "A Gogodala woman in typical dress, she stands adjacent to her entrance [A Sotawa] to the longhouse [Genama]" (Crawford 1977). (Museum der Kulturen, Basel, [F] Vb 7234, copyright Dadi Wirz)

# APPENDIX: PAUL WIRZ CHRONOLOGY

29 May 1892	born in Moscow, Russia
1912 & 1913 1914–1915	two journeys to North Africa studies in physical anthropology, geography, anthropology, and zoology at University of Zurich, Switzerland (Pro- fessor Otto Schlaginhaufen, Professor Hans Jakob Wehrli)
1915–1919	first research trip to the Netherlands Indies—Netherlands New Guinea (Marind-anim)
1919–1920	studies in anthropology, zoology, and mineralogy at University of Basel (Professor Felix Speiser)
1920	doctorate at University of Basel (thesis: "Religion und Mythus der Marind-anim von holländisch Süd-Neu-Guinea und deren totemistisch-soziale Gliederung")
1920-1924	second research trip to the Netherlands Indies—Sunda Islands and North New Guinea (Lake Sentani)
1925–1927	third research trip to the Netherlands Indies—Sunda Islands and North New Guinea (Lake Sentani)
1928	venia legendi at University of Basel
1929–1931	research trip to New Guinea, Papuan Gulf
1932–1940	travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa
	<ul> <li>Sardinia and Tunisia, 1932</li> <li>West Africa, Morocco, and Spain, 1933</li> <li>Ceylon, India, and Northeast Africa, 1934–1935</li> <li>India, Burma, Siam, Indochina, China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Formosa, 1936–1937</li> <li>North and South India (Kashmir, Ladakh, Nagaland), 1937–1939</li> <li>Ceylon, 1939–1940</li> </ul>
1941–1945	stay in the Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic)
1947–1948 1949–1950	travel in Ceylon travels in India, Pakistan, and Territory of Papua and New
1949-1950	Guinea—Highlands and Sepik
1952–1953	travels in Territory of Papua and New Guinea—Highlands, Sepik, and Maprik
1954 - 1955	travel to Territory of Papua and New Guinea—Maprik
31 Jan. 1955	died near Ulopu, New Guinea

### NOTES

- 1. For support of my research on Paul Wirz's photography I want to thank Wirz's family, his wife Erna Wirz and his son Dadi Wirz, who gave me access to all of their photographic materials, and the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland (the former Museum of Anthropology), where I had outstanding working conditions in the photographic archive.
- 2. A correct count is difficult to obtain. Some photographs have several negatives (of different sizes or as lantern slides); some prints, in contrast, have no negatives left; some photographs are published in books or articles by Paul Wirz but were not taken by him.
- 3. The material in the Museum of Cultures in Basel consists of original negatives (glass-plate, roll-film, 35 mm. film), repro negatives and duplicate negatives, lantern slides, vintage prints, and repro vintages. In the family archive there are original negatives, lantern slides, vintage prints, and albums. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York owns approximately 900 prints in albums or loose collections, some now identified as having been taken by Paul von Rautenfeld, an acquaintance of Wirz's for many years.
- 4. A general overview of the photographs of Wirz's New Guinea journeys is in preparation by the author and will be published by Crawford House Publishing, Bathurst.
- 5. On his early journeys to New Guinea, including his visit to the Papuan Gulf area, Wirz developed his photographic plates on-site himself to control the difficult exposure and to take advantage of the fact that developed plates are less sensitive than undeveloped plates. For that he had to travel with all necessary material in his luggage: the photographic plates, photographic paper, and photographic chemicals for developing. Later he sometimes sent film to Europe or Australia for developing.
- 6. For an example of Wirz's physical anthropological work, see Wirz 1926.
- 7. Around four-fifths of his 174 publications contain photographs; less than 10 percent include only photographs of objects.
- 8. For example, after visiting the Indonesian islands, Wirz published a small illustrated book about Nias and Mentawai: Nias, die Insel der Götzen: Bilder aus dem westlichen Insulinde (1929b).
- 9. Wirz reported, for example, on the Marind-anim: "Es gelang mir einst, einige Männer von *Bahor* zu überreden, zur Anfertigung von Photographien zwei *Dema* darzustellen. Das ging nicht so ohne weiteres, wie ich dachte. Selbst eine große Belohnung vermochte nichts zu ändern" (Wirz 1925a:8).
- 10. See, for example, photographs taken by A. J. Gooszen in Wirz's Marind-anim publication of 1925 (1925a: plate 1, ill. 1), and his remark concerning photographs from the Bataviaasch Genootschap voor Kunst en Wetenschapen (Wirz 1928b:x).
- 11. As customary in the classical monographs, Wirz also published some drawings he made during his stay with the Marind-anim.

- 12. In the rare case in which Wirz documented cultural change, he used a technique of opposing pictures portraying scenes "before and after." This technique corresponds to the mission photography of those years that wanted to document the success of conversion. Wirz used the technique with a totally different intention: to document the passing away of the traditional way of life through the influence of the mission. But he did not publish these pictures.
- 13. From 1928 to 1930 Wirz tried to establish a lodge for followers of the life reform movement, in the warm Swiss Ticino, where he offered health food and exercise.
- 14. Wirz's affinity with life reform and nudism became even more obvious in some of his pictures from Bali (see Wirz 1931) and his following journeys to Africa.
- 15. See Wirz's descriptions of his highlands travels from 1952: "Sugli altipiani della Nuova Guinea," *Le vie del mondo, rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano* 14 (1): 623–640, and "Tra i popoli primitivi della Nuova Guinea," *Le vie del mondo* 12:1307–1318.

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