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“The White Tribes of Melanesia.
Colonial communities in late nineteenth century British New Guinea.”

In April 1889 the Italian ethnographer Lamberto Loria lands in Port Moresby to venture on a seven-years journey along the coasts, islands, and inlands of British New Guinea. In 1897 he returns home with a considerable collection of naturalistic and anthropological specimens, ethnographic artefacts, and scientific and artistic photographs today preserved at the Museo delle Civiltà – museo preistorico etnografico ‘Luigi Pigorini’ of Rome. One hundred and twenty years later, his recently recovered field notebooks and diaries shed new light on Loria’s peculiar way of looking at British New Guinea as a single research field populated by indigenous people and several tribes (of missionaries, government agents, naturalists, traders, and adventurers) united by a common life at the extreme edges of ‘civilisation’. Writing a sort of ante litteram cultural anthropology of the colony, Loria attentively describes social relationships, games of power, economic status, linguistic homogeneity, division of roles and hierarchies, forms and rules of behaviour, shared values, residence and territorial delimitation that characterize white groupings on the island. Focusing on specific case studies, three different white tribes will be taken into account: protestant and catholic missionaries, and government agents. An example of colonial and colour crossing mobility will be further discussed.