



Ready for the Christmas dive on Belaga beach in 1966

#### **ABOUT M.J.A. DE KOSTER AND HER PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE**

Margherita Johanna Adriana (Rita) de Koster was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1918 in Leiden as the only daughter of Arie de Koster and Johanna Adriana de Koster-Sijthoff. Her two siblings, Arie Donald and Henri Johan, were born respectively in 1911 and 1914. Her father was a consular official from 1897 to 1907, ending as acting consul general in Singapore, after which he became the director of a large flourmill in Leiden. Her mother came from a family of publishers.

Before the Second World War, Rita de Koster studied Social Geography in Amsterdam. After an intermission, she took her degree in 1950. From September 16, 1951 to the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1984, she was employed by the University of Amsterdam at the department of Cultural Anthropology. She successively worked for the professors Johannes Fahrenfort (1933-1955), André Köbben (1955-1976), Jan Pouwer (1962-1966), Jeremy Boissevain (1966-1993), and Johannes Fabian (1980-1999). She lectured Cultural Anthropology to students of Social Geography for whom this was a mandatory subsidiary subject. Additionally, she worked in the library of the department of Cultural Anthropology.

Rita de Koster conducted anthropological fieldwork on different occasions; the first time in 1960 in Ethiopia. Later on, she did research in 1963/64, 1966/67, 1980/81 and 1982 in the Nggela Islands (the Florida Islands on World War II maps) in the Solomon Islands archipelago in the Pacific Ocean. This archipelago exists of Nggela Pile (Small Nggela), Nggela Sule (Big Nggela), Tulaghi (the former capital of the Solomon Islands, before Honiara), Olevugha, Vatilau, and some smaller islands. Rita de Koster never published this research. She did make a series of photographs during her stay that were arranged thematically in three identical sets of 13 photo albums. She also brought over to the Netherlands a traditionally woven house, complete with furnishings, from the village of Belaga on Nggela Pile. This house (shipped of in 1964) was initially meant for the Tropical Museum of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, but it eventually ended up at the Museum for Education, the present Museon, in The Hague (exhibited in 1980). The photographs and the village preserved in their original form mainly illustrate life on the Nggela Islands and thus belong in the ethnographic museological practice of the twentieth century, preceding the contemporary aesthetical

museological practice. Cultural elements that were photographed and transferred portray the culture on the Nggela Islands as a culture in development: traditional and modern elements go hand in hand and lead one to suspect the future.

While the photo albums show the inhabitants of the Nggela Island in their temporariness, the albums themselves too present themselves as dated. Rita de Koster herself was growing in her scholarly work from traditional to modern too. Her work, on the one hand, resembles the study of *Tepoztlán, a Mexican village: A study of folk life* from Robert Redfield (1930) and, on the other hand, the film *Trobriand cricket: An ingenious response to colonialism*, by Jerry Leach and Gary Kildea (1973). Rita de Koster also made beautiful shots of cricket, just like Leach and Kildea, but not similar to their modern conflict-model. She made use of the older harmony-model of Redfield which resulted in a kind of *folk cricket*. On the face of it, the photographs in the albums show few sharp edges. Possibly, this was not only inspired by the age in which ethnography emerged, but also by the ethnographer's character, in its turn dependant on the time frame. How would Margaret Mead with her cheerful *snapper's boldness* have looked at the Solomon Island's inhabitants?

In all probability, Rita de Koster used her photograph albums during her teaching. Sjaak van der Geest, who wrote an In Memoriam on the site of the University of Amsterdam about her, mentions that she often used to teach her students of Social Geography at her home in the Minervalaan 96 in Amsterdam-South. Possibly she gave her students a virtual tour over the Nggela Islands using the photographs in her albums. The albums contain no text at all but, her and there in the accompanying index, we find what looks like instructions Rita herself could use when pointing out certain connections to students while they were watching certain photographs: "State .. ", "Refer to .. ". The albums are titled as follows: 1. Belaga 1964; 2. Population - Life Cycle; 3. Building; 4. Furniture & Clothing 5. Cooking; 6. The Sea; 7. The Land; 8. Trade & Traffic; 9. Church; 10. School; 11. Leisure & Government; 12. Gela-Tour; 13. Honiara & Studying Belaga. In the themes of the albums, the view on Cultural Anthropology seems to meet the view on Social Geography. It resembles a Cultural Anthropological structure for Social Geographers. Especially information on the anthropological issue of kinship is limited to some rare notes in the index stating that someone is the father, mother or child of the person in the picture. Possibly, this fits to the reality in which (geographical) neighbourliness was more important than the (anthropological) kinship. But, also neighbourliness is only rarely mentioned in the index.

Rita de Koster was single. She travelled on her own to the Solomon Islands. She did live and work together with her regular interpreter Mabel Manukama in the village of Belaga, her main place of residence and study location. In 1982, her niece, Saskia de Koster, visited her in Belaga. Sjaak van der Geest writes in his In Memoriam that she lived an explicitly rich social life. He based this on testimonies of both her family and her students. Nevertheless, her almost uncommented photographs rather give the impression of a certain reserve in her association with people. Many of her pictures containing people – especially those of houses with their occupants in front of them that fit a survey – have a certain formality about them. Likewise, when she made photos of emotive issues – for example a husband at the side of his deceased wife – she saw to it that the shot was mainly respectful rather than informative.

Sjaak van der Geest poses in the In Memoriam that there is something puzzling about the fact that Rita de Koster never published about the societies where she executed her fieldwork. He thinks this might be due to her love of structure as is notable in the arrangement of the material in the library of Cultural Anthropology, of books and odd copies of articles, in the codification and on the bookshelves. They must have been extremely well planned with a severe attention to categorisation according to content, form and use. Also the categorisation of the pictures in the albums is carefully tended and, in a certain way not just skilful but even ingenious. Both index and albums are an example of clear organisation, even more so due to the stringent separation in word (in the index) and image (in the albums). Sjaak van der Geest may be right to think that

someone dedicating so much attention to structure will not get down to writing, which also needs interpretation, a less tidy brain activity in which one has to be able to let go or review a found or created arrangement. This limitation to just arranging must have been an early understanding as there have never been notes about the fieldwork. It is possible that a beginning of an interpretation of experiences and observations in the field is present in the letters that Rita de Koster wrote to the home front.

After her retirement in 1984, Rita shifted her interest. After her professional life as an anthropologist, she dedicated herself to the history of her family on her mother's side, showing through the publication in 2011 of the book: *Genealogie van de families Ten Zijthoff/Ten Siethof uit Goor* [Genealogy of the families Ten Zijthoff/Ten Siethof from Goor], by J. ten Hove en M.J.A. de Koster. Also in this project, personal data were treated carefully.

On the 21st of May 2010, Rita de Koster passed away. She left three identical sets of the above mentioned thematically organised albums with photographs of the Nggela Island to the following institutes: 1. Solomon Islands National Museum in Honiara; 2. Museon in The Hague; and 3. Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies in Nijmegen. This Centre will accommodate the albums at the Catholic Documentation Centre where they will be deposited for perusal.