# Tours of the past through the present of eastern Indonesia

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The past twenty years have seen a variety of data being collected from largely undocumented languages in eastern Indonesia, an area hitherto almost unknown. Such data are valuable in reconstructing the history of this area at a macro-level. In addition, as research in particular areas becomes more fine-grained, it is possible to combine linguistic data with data from oral history and ethnographic observation in order to reconstruct the migration histories of specific speaker groups. A case study of such a micro-level reconstruction is presented here.

**1. INTRODUCTION.** One fundamental idea in historical and contact linguistics is that similarities between two geographically close languages are not accidental but point to a shared history of their speakers. The speakers either descend from a common ancestor so that the similar features were passed down the generations; or they were once in contact with each other and features from the one language were adopted into the other. The nature and spread of similarities between languages spoken today can thus be studied to reconstruct pictures of the past of their speakers. This is particularly relevant in regions where written historical records are generally lacking, and archaeological records, if they exist, have yet to be uncovered. One such region is eastern Indonesia.

Obviously, a comparison of similarities across languages can only be done once the languages have been described. This paper therefore addresses the following question: How did language description and documentation in eastern Indonesia contribute to our knowledge of the history of people living in the area? After presenting an overview of descriptive and documentation efforts in eastern Indonesian languages (Section 2), the impact of the documentation will be illustrated at the level of the language families in the area (Section 3) and at the level of individual language communities (Section 4). Section 5 presents a summary.

**2. RECENT DESCRIPTIVE AND DOCUMENTATION EFFORTS IN EASTERN INDONESIA.** Linguistically and ethnically, eastern Indonesia constitutes an interface between the Austronesian and Papuan worlds. Papuans have lived in this area for more than 40,000 years, whereas Austronesians came down from Taiwan less than 6,000 years ago.

What was originally the Papuan area became largely "austronesianized" through the in-coming Austronesians, who assimilated with the original populations. However, in some locations, Papuan languages continued to be spoken – in Papua itself, as well as in outlier groups located west and east of Papua. The westerly outlier groups are in Halmahera in the north and Timor Alor Pantar in the south, as indicated in Figure 1. Note that 'Papuan' is a cover term for numerous mutually unrelated non-Austronesian language groups in Papua or its vicinity.
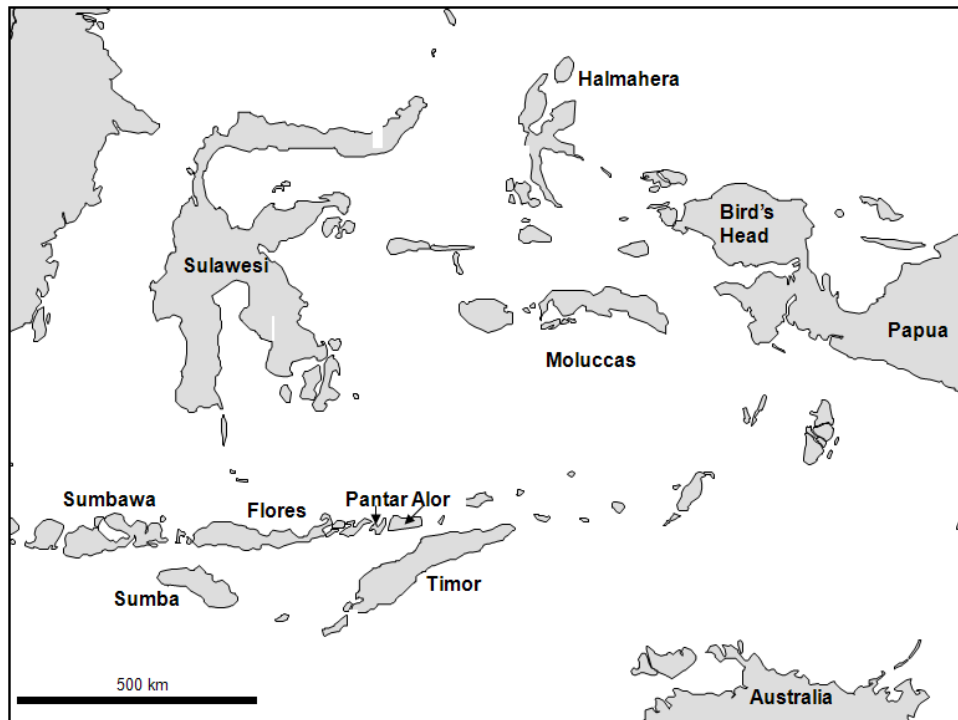


FIGURE 1: Eastern Indonesia

The number of languages spoken in the area of eastern Indonesia as discussed here may be estimated at 200–250 – a figure that is vague for lack of data (see also Hammarström & Nordhoff, forthcoming). Since the early 1990's, when eastern Indonesia was considered "perhaps the least known area in the Austronesian world today" (Tryon 1995: 12), we have gone from almost no information to a body of documentation on 25–30 languages. Most of these are grammars of individual languages that were produced by PhD students or postdoc-toral researchers from institutions in Australia and the Netherlands. In addition, and with varying results, documentation projects have focused on Rongga in Flores, Waima'a and Fa-taluku in East Timor, languages of Central Maluku (Alang, Sou Amana Teru, Alune), and Totoli in Northern Sulawesi. Documentation is ongoing for Iha in West Papua, Mor on the Bomberai peninsula, and Wooi in Yapen Island in the Geelvink Bay, north of Papua's main-land. In sum, during the past two decades about 10% of the languages in eastern Indonesia

have been grammatically and lexically described (Klamer & Ewing 2010: 5 provide references), and a handful have been documented.

**3. IMPACT AT THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE FAMILIES.** Research relating to language family groupings sets out to know whether or not two languages have a common ancestor, and if so, what their ancestor would have looked like. A linguist who encounters an undescribed language will first try to relate that language to a language family in the area, since it is easier to analyze an undescribed language when it can be related to existing knowledge of other languages. In eastern Indonesia, this means asking the question whether the language is Austronesian or belongs to one of the Papuan families.

Which parts of the new language do we consider in our attempt to group it with an existing family? Classic comparative research hypothesizes family relations on the basis of geographical closeness of languages and then proceeds to demonstrate the relatedness by comparing sets of cognate words (lexicon) and paradigms (morphology). But what if geographically close languages do not have cognate words and morphology? Can we group languages together on the basis of other types of evidence, such as shared structural features in the domains of phonology, morphology, and syntax? Examples of structural dimensions (also referred to as 'typological features') along which languages in eastern Indonesia have been grouped, include segment inventory (how many consonants and vowels do languages have; and which ones?), syllable structure, the position of affixes (prefixing or suffixing?), word order (verb-object, or object-verb?), types of grammatical alignment systems (nominative-accusative, active-stative, or split S?), and the encodings of nominal possession (Foley 2000, Klamer 2002, Himmelmann 2005, Pawley 2005, Donohue 2007).

It is generally agreed that shared structural features in isolation are too instable to signal deep time family relations between languages. It is, however, commonly agreed that if languages share a set of such features, this might point to a history of contact between their speakers. For example, when people adopt a second language (to trade, get an education, when they marry, and so on), they will – mostly unconsciously – use some structures of their first language in the new language they adopt. As a result, their second language will contain features that are similar with the first, and these features can be passed down to the language their children acquire. Such similarities between languages are then due to linguistic contact rather than to a common ancestor language.

With the amount of data on languages of eastern Indonesia increasing, it is now possible to group the languages in this region not only according to their genealogy but also according to their structural features. When the groupings overlap, it is possible to identify certain shared structural features as 'typical for Austronesian' or 'typical for Papuan' and then formulate hypotheses about the direction in which the features transferred – from Austronesian to Papuan or the other way around.

For some Austronesian languages in eastern Indonesia with structures unlike those found in western Austronesian languages, and similar to those found in Papuan languages, we believe the structures have a Papuan donor; while some Papuan languages have adopted Austronesian features (see Klamer et al. 2008, and references cited there). The study of similarity patterns across languages of different families thus enables us to reconstruct where there has been contact between Austronesian and Papuan groups, even in locations where no such contact exists today. It also allows us to formulate hypotheses about the origin of the

adopted features as Austronesian or Papuan, and the direction of transfer; this is information which is valuable in the study of the population history of the region.

However, it must be stressed that the amount of linguistic information for this immense area is still extremely limited, and the set of languages that can be compared constitute a convenience sample, not a geographically representative one. Any macro-level contact scenarios we propose must therefore remain hypothetical, and often we only have evidence for diffusion through (pre-historic) substrate contact between Austronesian and Papuan in a particular region. This can mean three things: (i) Papuan speakers shifted to an Austronesian language and introduced Papuan traits into it. This presumably happened in the languages of Halmahera such as Taba (Bowden 2001); (ii) Austronesian speakers shifted to a Papuan language and introduced Austronesian traits into it. This is what must have happened in Fataluku in East Timor (McWilliam 2007); and (iii) there has been a diffusion of features, but we do not know in which direction the transfer took place. Note that the absence of any evidence for diffusion in certain areas (e.g. Sumba) is equally interesting as it suggests a different population history.

In sum, description and documentation efforts in eastern Indonesia are having an impact at the macro-level in the sense that, with the newly available data, more detailed genealogical groupings and typological characterizations of both Austronesian and Papuan language systems can be designed. And these typological 'fingerprints' can be used to compare languages for the presence of features that might have crossed family borders. As far as such features signal contact between members of the two families, they constitute evidence that in certain zones of Indonesia, speakers of Austronesian and Papuan languages have been in contact with each other, even if we see no such contacts today, while in other areas no traces of such contacts exist.

**4. IMPACT AT THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE COMMUNITY.** In addition to the larger-scale comparisons discussed in the previous section, the last ten years have seen some regions within eastern Indonesia being studied with more granularity. One such region is the Alor Pantar archipelago, just north of Timor. The Alor Pantar islands are home to some twenty closely related Papuan languages (Holton et al. 2012), see Figure 2.

Six of these languages have now been studied in depth, and we also have extensive lexical and syntactic survey data that is representative for the whole group. One language is an exceptional case: It is spoken on the coasts of Pantar and Alor and is locally referred to as *Bahasa Alor* 'Alorese'. Alorese has less than 5% lexical similarity to its Papuan neighbors, and its lexicon and morphology clearly show it belongs to the Austronesian family. The Alorese are considered 'non-indigenous' in contrast to the mountain populations of Alor and Pantar (Anonymous 1914: 75–78). The fact that they only inhabit coastal areas (see Figure 2) indeed suggests a sea-faring past.

What is the origin of this coastal Austronesian group that is surrounded by Papuan speakers? When did they arrive? To investigate this, I compared Alorese with a language assumed to be its closest genealogical relative, Lamaholot. Lamaholot is spoken in a number of dialectal varieties on the islands of Flores, Solor, Adonara, and Lembata, located some 200 km east of Pantar Island, see Figure 3.

For the comparison I used the following types of data: Survey word lists and recent grammar sketches on Lamaholot and Alorese that contain information on derivational and
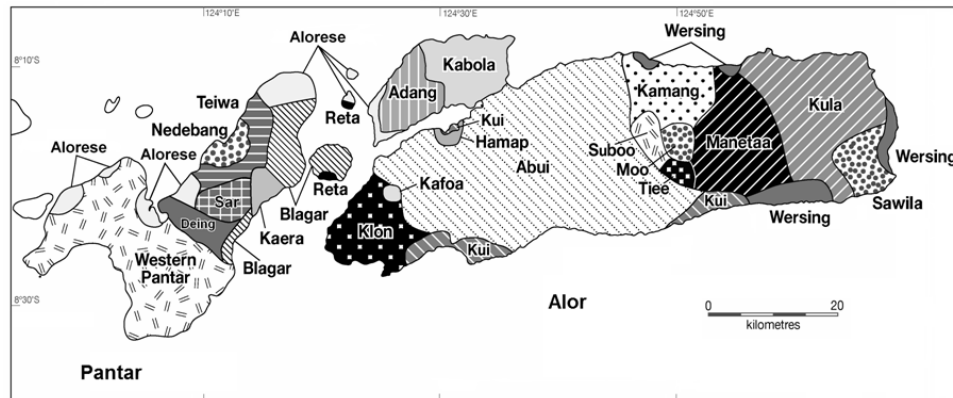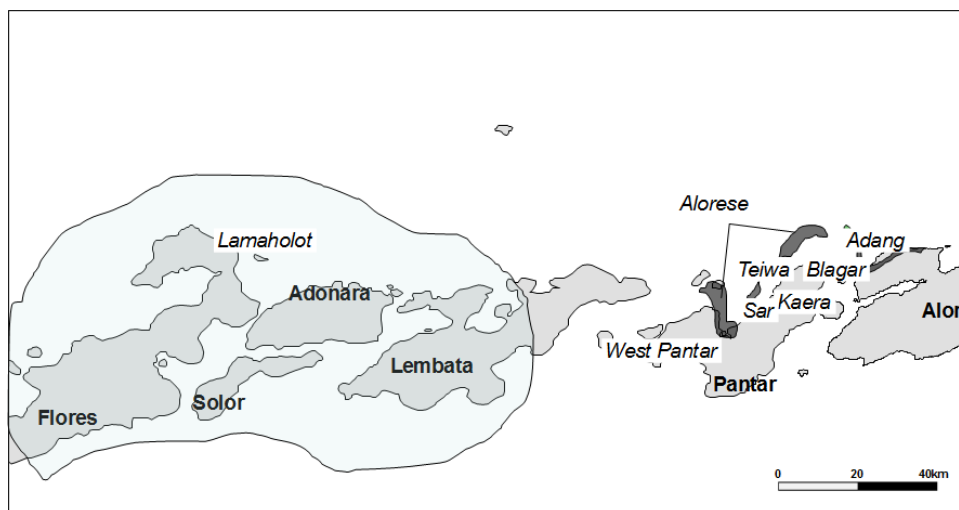
FIGURE 2: Languages on Pantar and Alor



FIGURE 3: Lamaholot, Alorese, and Papuan languages surrounding Alorese

inflectional morphology and syntax (Nishiyama & Kelen 2007, Klamer 2011), published information on proto-Austronesian and proto-Malayo-Polynesian morpheme reconstructions (Blust 2009), historical and ethnographic sources (Anonymous 1914, Lemoine 1969, Barnes 1973: 86, Barnes 2001: 280, Rodemeier 2006), and personal communications about Alorese oral history (for details see Klamer 2011, Klamer, forthcoming).

I found that Lamaholot and Alorese have around 60% lexical similarity (Klamer 2011: Appendix), which suggests that they are closely related but separate languages, comparable to German and English, which are also 60% lexically similar. The most striking contrast between Lamaholot and Alorese is their morphological profile: While Lamaholot has a significant amount of derivational and inflectional morphology, Alorese is completely isolating,

as illustrated in Table 1. Comparing the Lamaholot derivational morphemes with forms reconstructed for Proto-Austronesian (PAN) or Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) (a subgroup of Austronesian) clearly shows they are Austronesian.

| DERIVATIONAL MORPHOLOGY | LAMAHOLOT | ALORESE |
|---|---|---|
| Consonant replacement, e.g. *p*et 'bind' > *m*et 'belt' < PAN *ma 'stative' | yes | no |
| Prefix *bə(C)*-, e.g. *rawuk* 'hair' > *bə*-*rawuk* 'have hair' < PMP *maR- 'intransitive verb' | yes | no |
| Prefix *pə*-, e.g. *tua* 'palm wine' > *pə*-*tuak* 'taste like palm wine' < PMP *pa-ka- 'treat like X'; *tutu'* 'speak', *pə*-*nutu'* < PMP *paR 'deverbal noun' | yes | no |
| Prefix *kə*-, e.g. *pasa* 'swear' > *kə*-*pasa* 'oath' < PMP *ka- 'formative for abstract nouns' | yes | no |
| Infix *-ən*-, e.g. *tali* 'add' > *t*-*ən*-*ali* 'added thing?' < PAN *-um- 'Actor voice' | yes | no |
| Prefix *mən*-, e.g. *ba'at* 'heavy' > *mən*-*a'at* 'something heavy' < PAN *ma 'stative' | yes | no |
| **INFLECTIONAL MORPHOLOGY** | | |
| Possessor suffix | yes | no |
| Prefix encoding subjects on vowel-initial transitive verbs | yes | a few fossilized |
| Suffix encoding subjects of intransitive verbs | yes | no |
| Agreement on adjectives | yes | no |
| Agreement on numerals | yes | no |

TABLE 1: Derivational and inflectional morphology in Lamaholot and Alorese[1]

The contrasts in the inflectional morphology of Lamaholot and Alorese are illustrated for possessor encoding in examples (1) and the encoding of transitive subjects in examples (2).

(1) Possessor suffix present in Lamaholot (LMH), absent in Alorese (ALR)[2]

    a. LMH (Nishiyama & Kelen 2007: 24)

    *lango-**nən***
    house-3SG
    'his house'

    b. ALR (Klamer 2011: 52)

    *ni    uma*
    3SG   house
    'his house'

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[1] Lamaholot data from Nishiyama & Kelen 2007: 48–54; PAN and PMP data from Blust 2009: 359, 363–366, 370.

(2) Subject prefix on transitive verb in Lamaholot (LMH), absent in Alorese (ALR)

    a. LMH (Nishiyama & Kelen 2007: 124)

       *Go*    ***k****-a'an*      *tembok*   *pe'en*   *me'an*
       1SG    **1SG**-make   wall      the     red
       'I made the wall red.'

    b. ALR (Kmalner n.d., AAS: 021)

       *Go*    *lelang*   *tale*   *te*    *gato*
       1SG    make    rope   that   snap
       'I snapped that rope.'

The data in Table 1 illustrate that Austronesian morphology is abundant in Lamaholot and virtually absent in Alorese. Both languages are closely related – they descend from a common ancestor language, which we may refer to as 'proto-Lamaholot-Alorese'. As morphemes are more easily lost over time than they are gained, I propose that Proto-Lamaholot-Alorese had at least the amount of morphology of today's Lamaholot. When Alorese and Lamaholot split, Lamaholot kept reflexes of much of the proto-morphology, while almost all of it was lost in Alorese.

Given the geographical distance between the Lamaholot and Alorese settlements (see Figure 3), the split must have occurred when speakers emigrated from the Lamaholot homeland on Flores, Solor, and Lembata, to settle on Pantar and Alor some 200 kilometers further east. This migration occurred before or around ~1,400 AD. This date *ante quem* is based on local legends, which contain reference to a 'colony of Javanese' or *orang djawa* settled on the north coast of Pantar '5 to 600 years ago' [in 1914] (Anonymous 1914: 77). Note that in regional Malay (used by Anonymous to record the legends) the notion *orang djawa* does not necessarily denote people from Java but probably refers to immigrants from elsewhere in the archipelago.[3] In other words, the coastal settlers mentioned in the legends which are referred to as 'Javanese' may be considered 'foreigners'. This ties in with observations that no linguistic or cultural links exist between Lamaholot and Javanese, while today's Alorese and Lamaholot are very close on both counts. In sum, I propose that the *orang djawa* in these old legends were in fact Lamaholot speakers from Flores, Solor, or Lembata.

The following is additional supporting evidence. The legend referred to by Anonymous (1914) is the first of two legends also reported in Lemoine (1969), Barnes (1973: 86, 2001: 280), and Rodemeier (2006). The first legend recounts that two 'Javanese' brothers, Aki Ai and his younger brother Mojopahit, sailed to Pantar, where Aki Ai treacherously abandoned Mojopahit. Mojopahit's descendants eventually established four kingdoms on the coasts of Pantar and Alor, called Baranusa, Pandai, Munaseli, and Alor Besar. The second legend recounts that 'Javanese' immigrants who were allied to one of the Pantar kings destroyed one of the other kingdoms, after which the defeated population fled to Alor Island. It thus seems clear that four foreign kingdoms were in place around 1,300 AD in northern Pantar; that they were established by non-indigenous colonizers who came from the west; and that the same groups colonized the Alor coast (see Rodemeier 2006 for more

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[2]   Abbreviations: 1, 3 – 1st, 3rd person; SG – singular

[3]   Cf. footnote 1 in Anonymous (1914: 89): 'on these islands, "orang djawa" is interpreted as everything ("alles") which comes from elsewhere in the archipelago'; compare Kambera (Sumba) *tau Jawa* (lit. 'Javanese') 'stranger, someone not from Sumba' (Onvlee 1984: 115).

discussion). It is then interesting to observe that today, the location names Baranusa, Alor Besar, Pandai, and Munaseli are still known, and that these are the places where speakers of Alorese live.[4] In sum, I propose that the legendary 'Javanese' who settled on Pantar some 700 years ago were in fact the ancestors of today's Alorese speakers.

Having established that Alorese is a relative newcomer on Pantar Island, and seeing that it is surrounded by Papuan neighbors, we can investigate the amount of contact that existed between the Alorese and their neighbors by examining the features they borrowed from Papuan. Data from recent research now make it possible to compare the lexicon and syntax of Alorese with five of its Papuan neighbor languages: Teiwa, Blagar, Kaera, Sar, Western Pantar, and Adang, see Figure 2.

The somewhat surprising outcome of this comparison is that very few Papuan words (less than ~5% of the basic Alorese lexicon, from 5 different Papuan languages) were borrowed into Alorese, and also very little Papuan syntax was borrowed. The local Papuan languages have had minimal influence on Alorese, which suggests that contact between Alorese and Papuan speakers cannot have been very intensive or long-term. Note that the fact that Alorese and Papuan speakers are currently in contact is irrelevant as Indonesian is the lingua franca on the islands.

The limited amount of lexical and syntactic borrowing from Papuan into Alorese does not connect straightforwardly with the observation that Alorese lost all the morphology of its ancestor language. Inflectional and derivational morphology is known to be seriously problematic for post-adolescent second language learners who have passed the 'critical threshold' (Lenneberg 1967) for language acquisition (Kusters 2003: 21, 48). In other words, when morphology gets lost, that usually involves a stage where the language is learned as a second language by post-adolescent speakers. There is, as of yet, no evidence of Papuan speaker groups shifting *en masse* to Alorese. There is however reason to believe (see Klamer 2011, forthcoming) that Alorese men married women from various neighboring Papuan clans, thus bringing adult speakers of different Papuan languages into the Alorese community. These individuals acquired a simplified Alorese variety, which became nativized and was passed down the generations. The question remains why these Papuan speakers did not introduce more of their Papuan syntax and lexicon into their Alorese, or if they did, why their children did not acquire it. Was there community pressure to speak Alorese in its lexically and syntactically 'original' form, while the morphology was lost for other reasons? Additional research on social positions and language attitudes of speakers in Alorese communities may help to shed light on this puzzle.

**5. SUMMARY.** The past twenty years have seen a variety of data being collected from largely undocumented languages in eastern Indonesia, a hitherto almost unknown area where Austronesian and Papuan languages meet. Such data have an impact on higher level groupings of languages into families and on the typological characterizations of Austronesian and Papuan languages. Typological 'fingerprints' of genealogical groups are used to compare individual languages for the presence of features that might have crossed the border of the family they belong to. Cross-cutting features like these indicate where speakers

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[4] Cape Muna in north Pantar is still considered the location of the mythical kingdom Munaseli. The language spoken there is referred to as 'Muna' or *Kadire Senaing* 'speech we understand' (Rodemeier 2006: 49), and it is clearly an Alorese dialect.

of Austronesian and Papuan languages have been in contact with each other, even if no such contact exists today. This information is useful in the study of the macro-level linguistic ecology of the area.

In addition, certain regions within eastern Indonesia have been the focus of more fine-grained research. For example, a significant body of data on individual languages on Pantar and Alor is now available, and when this is combined with oral histories and ethnographic observations, we can reconstruct histories of specific speaker groups on a micro-level. In the case discussed here, we proposed that speakers of Alorese, the only Austronesian language spoken on Pantar and Alor, are relative newcomers to the islands. They arrived on Pantar some 700 years ago from a homeland that is different from the one recounted in their legends. Since then, Alorese has lost all of its morphology, but there are no linguistic traces of intensive contact between Alorese and Papuan speakers.

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