

**Gender, mobility and population history: exploring material
culture distributions in the Upper Sepik and Central New
Guinea**

by

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.....These practices, then, and others which I will speak of later, were borrowed by the Greeks from Egypt. This is not the case, however, with the Greek custom of making images of Hermes with the phallus erect; it was the Athenians who took this from the Pelasgians, and from the Athenians the custom spread to the rest of Greece. For just at the time when the Athenians were assuming Hellenic nationality, the Pelasgians joined them, and thus first came to be regarded as Greeks. Anyone will know what I mean if he is familiar with the mysteries of the Cabiri-rites which the men of Samothrace learned from the Pelasgians, who lived in that island before they moved to Attica, and communicated the mysteries to the Athenians. This will show that the Athenians were the first Greeks to make statues of Hermes with the erect phallus, and that they learned the practice from the Pelasgians.....

Herodotus c.430 BC

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Abstract

New Guinea is the most linguistically diverse region in the world. There are over 1000 languages found there, reflecting a complex history of migration and interaction. The Upper Sepik is one of New Guinea's most linguistically heterogeneous areas but because the area has not been marked by the significant population movement and intense and far-reaching exchange systems apparent for some parts of New Guinea, this diversity may be more indicative of processes that maintain rather than lead to linguistic diversity. Accordingly, the region may offer great potential for those investigating population histories.

With this potential in mind ethnographers went into the Upper Sepik during the 1960s and 1970s with the intention of making representative material culture collections for the language groups found there. These collections combine to be, arguably, one of the most fine-grained material culture datasets that exist for New Guinea.

This thesis describes the manner in which these collections were documented and used to create a dataset to test for relationships between material culture and language. It begins with an overview of the study area including descriptions of the geography, environments, subsistence systems, settlement structures and social patterns, including an appraisal of marriage exchange, ritual, trade and warfare and how these may have facilitated or inhibited the spread of culture. This appraisal leads to an assertion that the sociality and mobility of men and women are affected differentially by such mechanisms, and that material culture belonging to men and women may differentially reflect population histories and the social processes that underpin the evolution of linguistic diversity.

The thesis then describes a round of analytical procedures used to test for relationships between language and attributes belonging to string bags and arrows which are respectively and exclusively produced by women and men. Associations between languages, measured in terms of their material culture similarity, are then compared to those determined according to their linguistic family relationship and their relative positions in geographical space. The analysis also tests whether differences in the way that women and men socialise and move through space influence the way in which material culture patterns through space.

The thesis concludes that attributes of classes of material culture are distributed differently for objects made by men compared to those made by women, that distance seems to be a stronger factor than language, and that environmental factors are also relevant. This study foreshadows ongoing research involving the dataset.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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