Affinal terms in Papuan Languages

Sister exchange, at its simplest, is a practice where unrelated men exchange sisters as wives. Usually, this exchange occurs within a broader cultural context which may guide whom men can exchange with (exogamy vs endogamy, clan systems etc.), as well as practical concerns like whether there are people to exchange with, whether there are willing participants, is their age appropriate etc.

If sister exchange is a cultural norm, then there is reticulation within the kinship genealogy and some relatives can be linked through genealogical and affinal (marriage) ties. For example, if there is a direct swap of sisters, a wife’s brother is also your sister’s husband. This is commonly thought to bore out in kinship terminology, since it is simpler to have a single term for a single person, than for a person to exist in multiple kin categories.

Papuan societies practice sister exchange widely, so can we see this practice reflected in their kinship terminology?

The most frequently occurring exchange pattern in kinship terminology amongst Papuan languages is a syncretism between the wife’s brother and the sister’s husband. This occurs in 73 of 89 languages we have data for. The pattern occurs throughout New Guinea and its surrounds (see map). Notably, this pattern applys only to male relatives.

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The equivalent pattern amongst female relatives creates a loop between the husband's sister and the brother’s wife. This pattern is less common across our Papuan language sample, only occurring in 17 of the 64 languages we have data for. Only 15 languages have HZ = ZW and WB = ZH. Does this reflect different exchange patterns? Or a different emphasis (e.g. patri- vs matrilineal, although seems unlikely)?

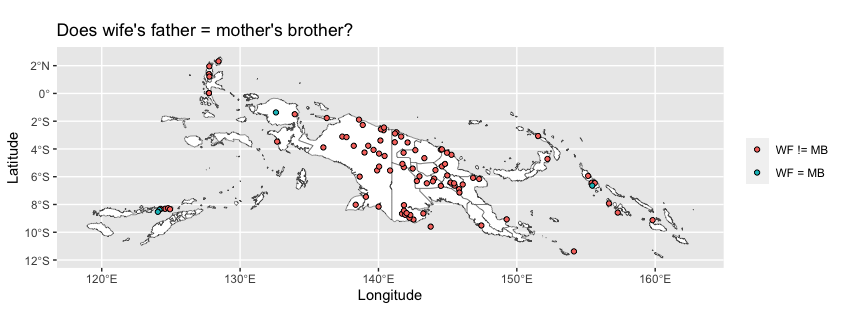
These patterns need further investigation – for example, do these syncretisms extend beyond the two kin types we have shown? Which might not reflect sister-exchange. Can we get data on the practice of sister-exchange in these languages? What about patterns of monogamy? Is this a case of one-to-one relationships occurring in males, but not women?

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Sister exchange patterns also influence the relationships ego has to the parent’s generation, if the practice is inter-generational (which is usually is). For example, if your wife’s brother is your sister’s husband, your wife’s father is also likely to be your mother’s brother. However, this pattern is more ambiguous because, unlike to one-to-one relationship between a husband and wife (under a system of monogamy), this pattern is one-to-many. That is, a mother may have many brothers, only one of which is your wife’s father.

Reticulated patterns of kinship are rarely borne out in Papuan languages. Occurring in one or two languages, depending on the pattern (see graphs below).



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