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Landscape in East Timor Papuan



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the nominal vocabulary labeling features of the landscape in Makalero, a Papuan language of East Timor. Makalero landscape terms are shown to behave grammatically like place names rather than like common nouns, thus reflecting the ontological distinction between places and objects as discussed in linguistic semantics. It is argued that cultural parameters underlie the morphological division between monomorphemic and derived terms, the metaphorical use of terms from the body and human domain in a subset of landscape terms, as well as place naming. Makalero is situated in a comparative perspective, including both genetically related and unrelated languages of the wider Pacific area. On this basis, I postulate a tentative “Papuan” type of landscape categorization, which contrasts with an Austronesian type.

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1. Introduction: language and landscape

Landscape is a domain of central importance to everyday life in most human communities. This is certainly true for the Makalero of East Timor, whose Papuan language is the focus of this study. Animist traditions, in which landscape and places are imbued with considerable potency, remain an important part of Makalero cultural life, despite the fact that the majority of Makalero speakers are catholic. Springs, rivers, and especially mountains are considered sacred and are associated with potent spirits. Landscape is also intimately connected to the organization of Makalero society; all Makalero clans have their own sacred sites, associated with their ancestors. The phrase *mu'a ki-ouar* ‘lord, owner of the land’ is used both for the spirit of a place as well as for aristocratic members of the clan associated with it (cf. also [Hicks, 1976](#)), and there is an overlap between place names and clan names, with some of them referring both to features of the landscape as well as to clan groups.

The study of landscape in language and its cross-linguistic comparison (for which the term ethnophysiography was coined by [Mark and Turk, 2003](#)) has come to the attention of linguists relatively recently and has since been discussed in terms of both basic linguistic description and theory (e.g. [Burenhult, 2008](#); [O'Meara, 2010](#)) as well as Natural Semantic Metalanguage (e.g. [Bromhead, 2011](#)). An interdisciplinary approach is used in [Mark et al. \(2011\)](#). All of these studies suggest that landscape categorization, as evidenced, for instance, by the denotational properties of landscape terms, differ considerably across languages. Given the high spiritual and social importance of landscape in Makalero culture as outlined above, the study of this domain in Makalero adds interesting insights to the current state of knowledge in landscape categorization. The inventory of basic landscape terms seems largely based on utilitarian principles; it is argued that, next to this, subgroups defined by derivational morphology and the metaphorical extension of terms from the body part and human domain indeed reflect cultural preoccupations. Grammatically, Makalero landscape terms form a covert category together with toponyms in

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that they can be interpreted as locative if used predicatively; this characteristic sets place names and landscape terms apart from all other nouns and seems to reflect the distinction between a ‘what’ category and a ‘where’ category as discussed in Lyons (1977) and Landau and Jackendoff (1993); see also Smith and Mark (1998). Finally, the comparison of the Makalero data with related languages, both nearby and further afield, reveals some interesting similarities; on this basis, a tentative “Papuan” type of landscape conceptualization, which seems to reflect an essentially land-oriented culture, is proposed. This contrasts with the sea-orientedness typically associated with Austronesian languages.

This study is organized as follows: Sections 2 and 3 provide background information about the Makalero language, its speakers and their geophysical environment, as well as the data upon which this study is based, their collection, and the orthographical conventions used. Section 4 presents the inventory of landscape terms in Makalero and discusses their semantic and structural properties. Together with place names, these landscape terms constitute a semantically-based class with distinctive grammatical properties, which are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 focuses on subgroups of landscape terms defined by their morphological makeup and the use of metaphor, arguing that, together with patterns in toponymy, this reflects the spiritual importance attributed to landscape in Makalero culture. Section 7 situates Makalero in a comparative perspective, contrasting systems of landscape categorization in Papuan languages with Austronesian ones. Finally, the concluding section summarizes insights into Makalero grammar that have come to light through this investigation into landscape, and shows how the language’s system of landscape categorization relates to the results from earlier studies, stressing in particular the importance of spiritual associations vis-à-vis day-to-day affordances.

2. East Timor: languages and geography

Timor is the largest and easternmost of the Lesser Sunda Islands. Numerous islands, belonging to the Indonesian Nusa Tenggara Timur and the Maluku provinces, are visible from the North coast, while the South borders the open Timor sea. The independent state of East Timor occupies the eastern half of the island as well as the exclave Oecussi on the Indonesian western half. It has an overall area of 14,954.44 km², and its 783 km coastline is surrounded by coral bases. Its interior is characterized by rugged highlands, with elevations of up to almost 3000 m on Mt. Ramelau near the border to Indonesian Timor. A number of rivers, draining either into the Banda sea to the north or the Timor sea to the south, have their source in the central mountains. Many of these are aquiferous only during the wet season. Towards the eastern tip, the inland of the island is dominated by the extensive Fuiloro plateau.

Located just south of the equator at approximately 8° S, East Timor has a tropical climate. The dry season, between May and November, is more pronounced in the northern half of the island. On its southern side, the rainy season may last up to 7 months (approximately December to June), with occasional precipitation even during the dry season. Temperatures are generally high, although at night time during the rainy season, they may at places fall below 20 °C, and considerably lower at higher altitudes.

Linguistically, East Timor displays a high degree of diversity, being home to some 16 languages.¹ Of these, 12 belong to the Austronesian family, while the remaining four are Papuan.² Fig. 1 shows the linguistic map of Timor.

Makalero, the smallest of the Papuan languages of Timor, is shown in black in Fig. 1. It is spoken in Iliomar, a subdistrict within East Timor’s easternmost Lautém district, by about 7200 people (according to the 2010 population census of the Direção Nacional de Estatística³). The subdistrict covers an area of approximately 300 km², occupying about 30 km of the south coast and extending some 10 km into the center of island. It is mostly covered with tropical dry forest and moist deciduous forest, with agricultural land scattered through the forested areas. The area is mountainous, with elevations ranging from sea level to almost 900 m on Mount Naunil. Several rivers cross the Makalero territory, running southwards into the Timor sea. The Iliomar subdistrict is naturally bordered in the south by the sea, in the west and north-west by the valley of the Irabere river, one of the major rivers running towards the southern coast of the island, and in the east by the Namaluto river.⁴ These clear natural borders roughly correspond to clear linguistic boundaries: Makalero borders the Austronesian language Naueti in the west and north-west, and the Papuan language Fataluku in the east and north-east. In the mountainous center of the island, to the north of Iliomar, Makalero gradually changes into its closest relative Makasae (also spelled Makasai, Makassai or Macassai).

Some 4000 of the Iliomar subdistrict’s population live in and around the town of the same name. The rest of the population is scattered in small settlements around the subdistrict. Most inhabitants of the subdistrict are subsistence farmers. The main crops cultivated are rice, maize and vegetables. Furthermore, there are fairly extensive coconut plantations. Other crops cultivated are candlenut (*Aleurites moluccana*), areca (*Areca catechu*) and lontar palms (*Borassus sondaicus*). Livestock includes water buffalo, cattle, pigs, goats, chickens and horses. Despite the subdistrict’s long coast line, little fishing is undertaken due to rough seas.

¹ The exact figure differs, depending on the source (see e.g. Lewis et al., 2013; Almeida, 1994). The number of 16 languages follows the count of the National Institute of Linguistics (INL) of the University of East Timor.

² While they are clearly related, the exact affiliation, both at a low and at a high level, is still a matter of some dispute (see Schapper et al., 2012).

³ Online at: http://www.dne.mof.gov.tl/published/2010%20and%202011%20Publications/Pub%20%20English%20web/Publication%20%20FINAL%20%20English%20Fina_Website.pdf.

⁴ See Section 4.2 for Makalero river names; the names used here are the official names used on maps.

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