

# A bird's eye view of the Bird's Head Peninsula

Anthropologist Jelle Miedema and linguist Ger Reesink were key participants in the Irian Jaya studies programme ISIR, an interdisciplinary research project that aimed to increase and integrate our knowledge of the Bird's Head peninsula on the western most end of New Guinea. Recently Miedema and Reesink synthesized the results of seven years' work in the book *One Head, Many Faces: New Perspectives on the Bird's Head Peninsula of New Guinea*. Time therefore to introduce the book and talk about the complexities of doing interdisciplinary research in a difficult environment.

Flip van Helden

## One head, many faces

Synthesizing the available knowledge on the bio-geographically and culturally diverse Bird's Head Peninsula is no mean feat. At some 200 by 300 kilometres, it contains sweltering coastal plains to the south and 3,000 metre high mountains in the north. In cultural terms, the Bird's Head is a transition zone between Southeast Asia and Oceania, containing a fragmented indigenous population that speaks no fewer than twenty different languages.

Miedema and Reesink start with geological features and available knowledge on prehistoric human settlement patterns deduced from archaeological material, the basic structure of local languages and human genetic research. Especially important were recent archaeological findings by Julliette Pasveer that showed local settlement dates back at least 26,000 years BP.

The body of the book deals with linguistics and ethnography, and gives the first full overview of languages in the Bird's Head. Reesink defines the peninsula as a *sprachbund*, a system of languages of different origin, that through long-term interaction came to share structural similarities. The analysis strengthens the idea that there is a structural link between the languages of eastern Indonesia and the Bird's Head.

This is followed by detailed consideration of kinship terms, exchange systems and the importance of land throughout the Bird's Head Peninsula. Central in the analysis stands the trade in cloths (*kain timur*) from the eastern Indonesian archipelago. Starting some 400 years ago, *kain timur* became important prestige goods in complex trade and exchange systems that linked other parts of present-day eastern Indonesia with the Bird's Head. Miedema and Reesink trace the manner in which these trade systems fanned out across the peninsula from their south-western point of entry, and reconstruct how this changed marriage practice and social structure over time.

The book continues with an overview of continuity and change in local knowledge systems. Miedema details a number of myth themes and shows how clusters of origin myths are related across the peninsula. Analysis of how particular myth themes and their actors transform provides information on migration routes and trade connections with surrounding areas. This information is supplemented by an overview of former and present-day notions of witchcraft, customary law and gender ideologies.

Miedema and Reesink conclude with an overview of ISIR findings and the recommendation to continue work to the south of the Bird's Head. This follows

from the likely cultural and linguistic links between groups in this area and the Bird's Head, the role of Islam among its Papuan groups compared to the predominantly Christian Bird's Head, and politico-economic developments emanating from the presence of a number of large resource development projects.

## Facing the authors

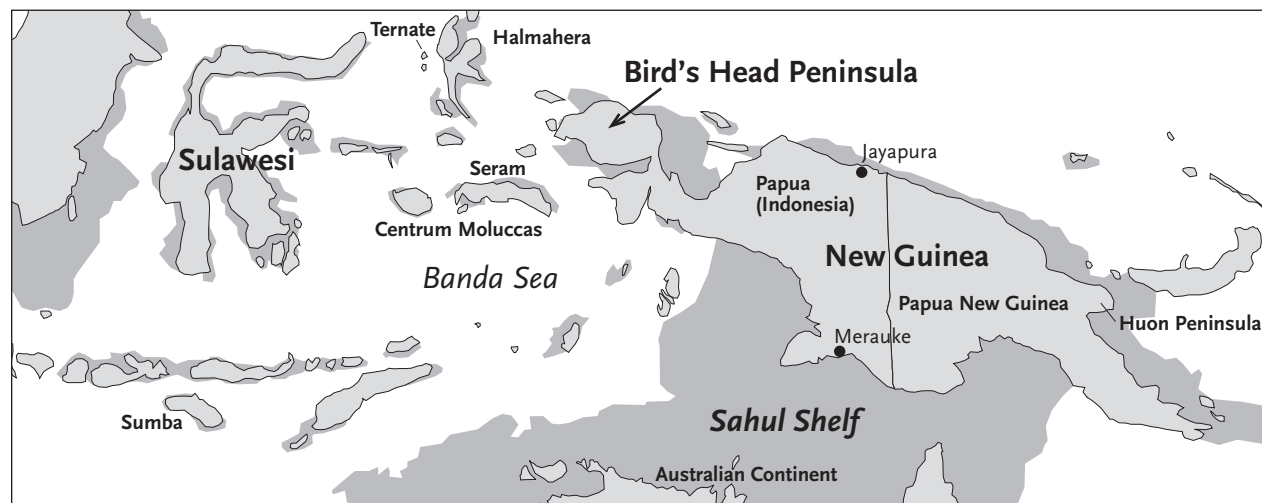
**FvH:** Why a project on the Bird's Head?

**JM:** In the beginning of the 1990s a group of people led by Wim Stokhof of the Department of Languages and Cul-

ture of us were not allowed into the field for about a year after Indonesian and foreign scholars were held hostage in the central highlands of Irian Jaya in 1996.

**FvH:** One cannot help note that for an interdisciplinary project that includes both social and natural scientists, the emphasis on linguistics and anthropology is somewhat overdone.

**GR:** This is true, there is a certain imbalance, but you have to realise that we started off as a linguistic and anthropological programme that was later expanded to include other disciplines.



tures of Southeast Asia and Oceania at Leiden University developed an Irian Jaya education and development programme. It began in 1991 but ended abruptly in March 1992 when Indonesia terminated all Dutch development aid following a political row with Minister Pronk. Our Indonesian colleagues continued with the education component of the project and we decided to develop a proposal to study the languages and cultures of New Guinea. When the proposal turned into a more interdisciplinary programme we decided that we should confine ourselves to a particular area. Earlier, between 1975 and 1981, I worked in the Bird's Head Peninsula for a local church organization, so when I became coordinator of the ISIR programme, I said, well I at least know a little bit about the Bird's Head from my earlier work there ...

**GR:** That's right, you knew enough to know that we basically knew nothing!

**FvH:** How did cooperation evolve after this breakdown in Dutch-Indonesian development relations?

**JM:** Relations with our Indonesian colleagues were actually very good. We were allowed to do our work even though it would take time to get visas and research permits. Unfortunately we did not manage to involve graduates from the earlier education project. People have families and jobs and cannot easily run off to do research on the Bird's Head. Moreover, doing research in such a remote area was not easy. Some of our people fell ill and a number

**JM:** Moreover, the impact of the hostage-taking incident in 1996 was variable between the disciplines. Linguists and anthropologists who had already started in 1993 were much less affected than researchers wanting to work on demography, public administration, geology, and archaeology. They started much later and were advised to wait until security had improved. The anthropologists and linguists were generally able to finish their research while others did not have enough time.

**FvH:** Did the various disciplines discuss each others' proposals?

**GR:** We certainly did in the beginning. Later it was the steering committee that emphasised the need to integrate the various findings. But how do you integrate the work of a geologist taking soil samples and that of a linguist looking into local use of the noun-phrase?

**FvH:** You didn't exactly make things easy, by taking disciplines as divergent as geology and linguistics? You could have sought the integration between more related social and natural sciences, for example by studying local resource use?

**JM:** At the time, donors were into interdisciplinary research, and linking up with the natural sciences was a precondition for funding. We looked at it as a chain of disciplines: linguistics has connections with anthropology, anthropology with ethno-botany and so on. Unfortunately the chain was broken. We have no results yet on ethno-botany, but hope that these may still be forthcoming. In

addition, interdisciplinary work takes extra time and energy. At the senior level there was interest in trying to make it work, but PhD students, for example, are under pressure to produce results in the disciplines they study.

**GR:** If I were to do it again, I would try to narrow the range of disciplines or themes somewhat.

**FvH:** Reading the book, I almost forgot that it deals with a rapidly changing region subject to considerable demographic, social and political turmoil. There is a lot of work done on indigenous groups, but not even a reference to the equally numerous Javanese transmigrants in the area. One-third of all trading activities in Irian Jaya takes place in the Sorong region but the analysis of local trading networks focuses on the traditional *kain timur* sys-

tem along the south coast where it would have been logical to look at the influence of transmigrants, but the researchers preferred to work on other themes. The result was the sum of such personal choices and circumstances.

**FvH:** Is there not an element of 'salvage anthropology' in your work, in the sense that many of your contributing scientists would like to describe a group of people before their culture changes for good?

**GR:** For the languages of the Bird's Head that is certainly the case. These languages are fast disappearing. But I don't think it is necessarily the nature of anthropology to look back; it largely depends on the questions that the individual anthropologist poses.

**JM:** It could, however, very well be that a younger generation of anthropologists is more interested in certain themes rather than a specific group of people and their culture. That means that detailed ethnographies receive less emphasis.

**FvH:** Talking of younger generations, will you be succeeded?

**GR:** There is little scope for a second phase of the project. Maybe Marian Klammer and her colleagues who are working on the Papuan languages of Alor will be able to do further work on East Indonesian languages. I am personally interested in combining the results of linguistic and genetic research to connect ancient migration and settlement patterns. There is so much work to do. We have just touched on things. ◀

- Miedema, Jelle and Ger Reesink. 2005. *One Head, Many Faces. New Perspectives on the Bird's Head Peninsula of New Guinea*. Leiden: KITLV Press. 220 pp. ISBN 906718229x

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The 'Irian Jaya Studies Programme for Interdisciplinary Research' (ISIR) ran between 1993 and 2000, the result of cooperation between the Indonesian Institute of Sciences in Jakarta, the Irian Jaya Study Centre in Jayapura, and the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania at Leiden University. Under the responsibility of the current director of IIAS, and funded by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (NWO-WOTRO), the programme aimed to increase and integrate knowledge of the Bird's Head Peninsula in anthropology, archaeology, botany, demography, geology, linguistics and public administration.