Toward a history of kinship in the Alor-Pantar languages of East Nusantara

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The kinship systems in Alor-Pantar languages exhibit great variation. The westernmost languages exhibit symmetrical descent, and cross-cousin marriage is or was until recently considered the ideal. At the opposite extreme in the highlands of Alor are found languages which expressly forbid cross-cousin marriage. Other languages show traces of asymmetrical exchange, reflected either in their kinship terminologies, in their marriage practices, or both. Even among languages whose kinship systems are roughly similar, the terms themselves are often not cognate. Likewise, cognate terms often have varying semantics across the languages. The general picture which emerges is one of drift toward symmetric exchange, though several independent sub-patterns can also be identified.

This paper presents a preliminary comparison of kinship terminologies and kinship practices in eight Alor-Pantar languages forming a broad geographic and typological sample of the family. A preliminary analysis suggests that the Alor-Pantar kinship system was originally non-prescriptive, with no distinctions between siblings and cousins. These systems then underwent drift toward prescriptive systems under influence of Austronesian migrants. Some evolved asymmetric systems with preference for maternal cross-cousin marriage, while others evolved symmetric systems. Whatever the exact nature of proto-Alor-Pantar kinship may have been, the family today shows enormous variation in both kinship terminology and practice, in spite of the fact that the various language communities are closely bound together through ties of marriage alliance. The Alor-Pantar languages thus provide fertile ground for the investigation of the ways kinship systems may evolve.