

The rise of clusivity and the loss of gender in Onnele pronominals

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A title in the mirror

van den Berg 2015

loss of clusivity
rise of gender

West Oceanic

this paper

rise of clusivity
loss of gender

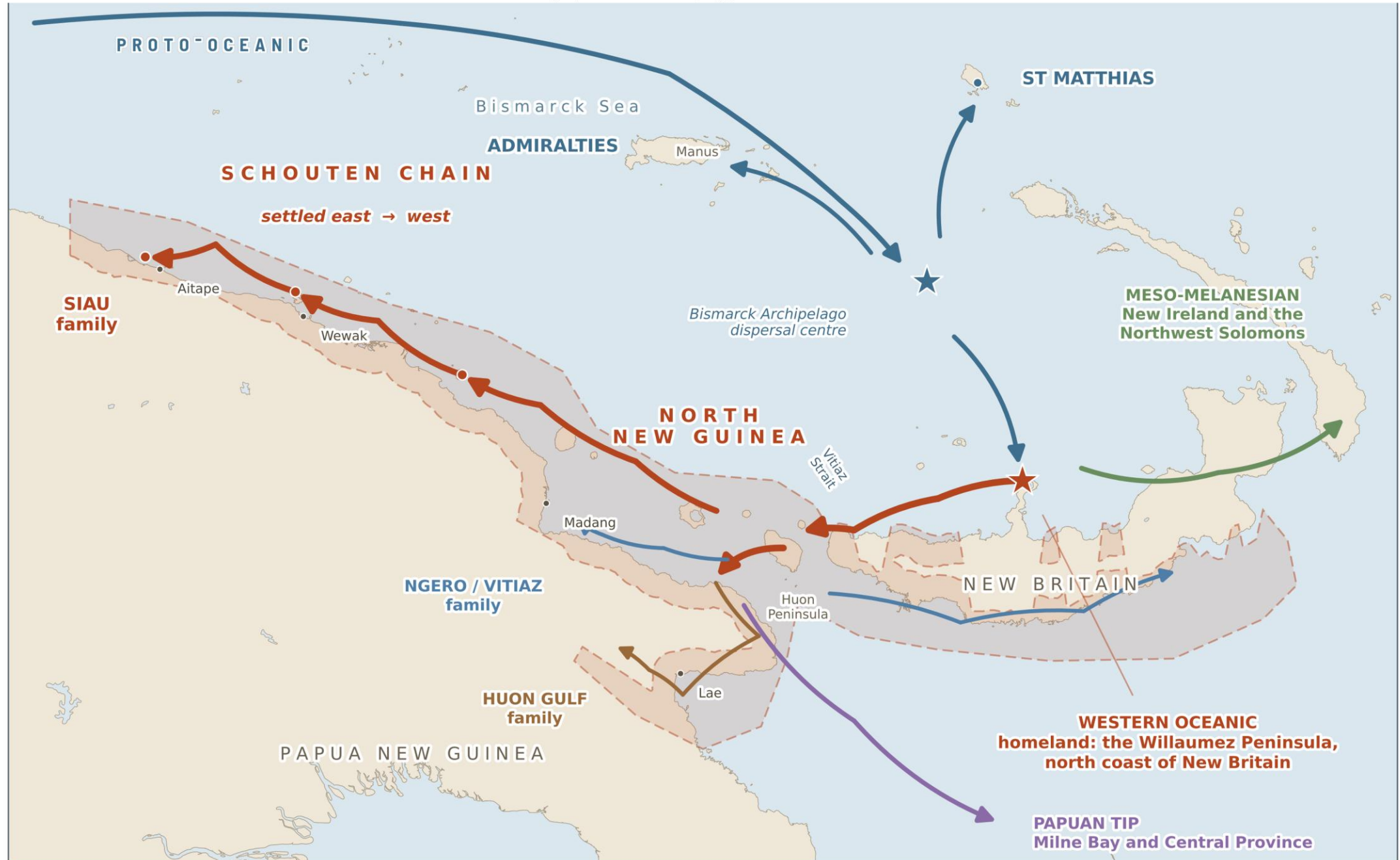
Onnele (Torricelli)

Exceptional language change at the Sissano Lagoon.

Neither explained by Onnele - Oceanic contact.

The North New Guinea group: from the Willaumez Peninsula to the Siau family

Proto-Oceanic's first-order groups in the Bismarck Archipelago, and the division of Western Oceanic on New Britain



Two questions from van den Berg

“ *What or who can be made responsible for the wholesale loss of clusivity in the Siau subgroup?*

van den Berg 2015: 30

“ *Why was clusivity lost but gender did not arise in the Siau languages?*

van den Berg 2015: 42–43

Onnele is one of the nearest Papuan neighbours.

The claims for Onnele

OLD

Gender loss

VERY RECENT

Clusivity gain

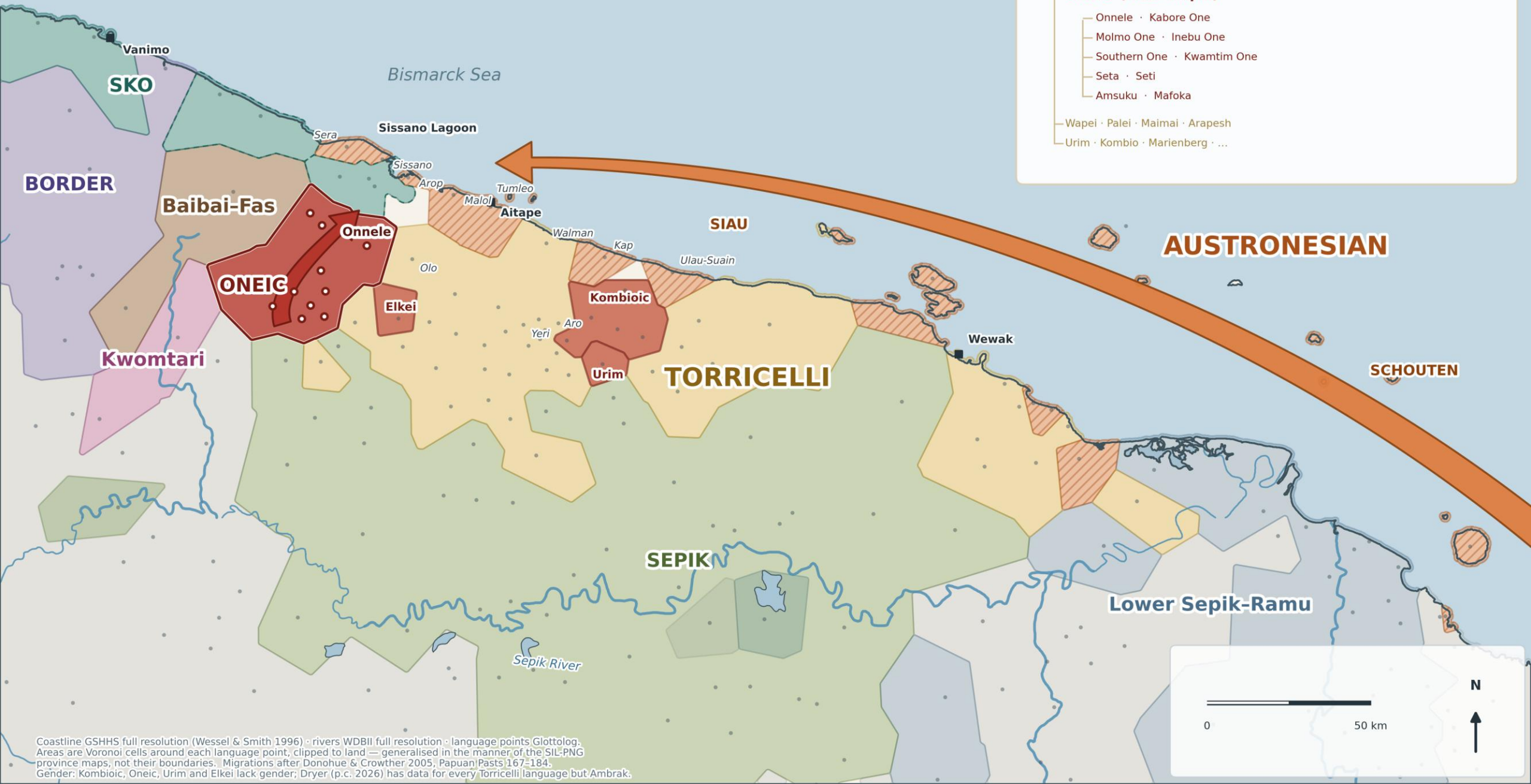
INTERNAL

**Neither is
contact**

Two changes, two thousand years apart. Internal, not contact induced.

Oneic within Torricelli

red = gender lost



Coastline GSHHS full resolution (Wessel & Smith 1996) · rivers WDBII full resolution · language points Glottolog.
Areas are Voronoi cells around each language point, clipped to land — generalised in the manner of the SIL-PNG
province maps, not their boundaries. Migrations after Donohue & Crowther 2005, Papuan Pasts 167–184.
Gender: Kombioic, Oneic, Urim and Elkei lack gender; Dryer (p.c. 2026) has data for every Torricelli language but Ambrak.

Gender across the northern coast



Gender: Palei · Maimai · Arapeshan · Wapei (except Elkei)
Marienberg · Urat · Wom · Monumbo

No gender: Kombioic · Oneic · Urim · Elkei

7 basic free pronouns and 5 pronominal verb prefixes

	Free	Verb prefix
1SG	<i>ki</i>	<i>k-</i>
2SG	<i>yene</i>	<i>y- ~ w- ~ r-</i>
3SG	<i>wu</i>	
1PL.EXC	<i>mu</i>	<i>m-</i>
1PL.INC	<i>mone</i>	
2PL	<i>pone</i>	<i>p-</i>
3PL	<i>nu</i>	<i>n-</i>

TYPICAL TORRICELLI 3s

w- feminine

r-, *n-*, *l-* masculine

Gender is gone. Its exponents survive as verb classes.

mone

'we, including you'

Deficient emphatic pronoun set

	Basic	Emphatic
1SG	<i>ki</i>	<i>k-one</i>
2SG	<i>yene</i>	—
3SG	<i>wu</i>	<i>w-one</i>
1PL.EXC	<i>mu</i>	<i>[mu m-one]</i>
1PL.INC	<i>mone</i>	—
2PL	<i>pone</i>	—
3PL	<i>nu</i>	<i>n-one</i>

- Disyllabic — but never twice.
- One column or the other.

Something moved.

The proto-language

*<i>ki</i> 1SG	*<i>yo</i> 2SG	*<i>wa</i> 3SG	*<i>mo</i> 1PL	*<i>po</i> 2PL	*<i>no</i> 3PL
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Proto-Oneic (Ross 2005b)

All monosyllabic.

- ***yene, pone, mone*** came from the emphatic set.

How clusivity emerged

Replaced

*yo → **yene**
2SG

*po → **pone**
2PL

Added

*mo → **mu**
1PL.EXC

*m-one → **mone**
1PL.INC

Clusivity

mu not you
1PL.EXC

mone and you
1PL.INC

Emphasis traded for clusivity.

What the emphatic set looks like now

Subject indexing	Basic	Emphatic	Emphatic phrases & alternatives
1SG	<i>ki</i>	<i>k-one</i>	<i>ki k-one, ki won(e)</i>
2SG	<i>yene</i>	—	<i>yene won</i>
3SG	<i>wu</i>	<i>w-one</i>	<i>wu w-one</i>
1PL.EXC	<i>mu</i>	—	<i>mu m-one</i>
1PL.INC	<i>mone</i>	—	<i>mone won</i>
2PL	<i>pone</i>	—	<i>pone won</i>
3PL	<i>nu</i>	<i>n-one</i>	<i>nu n-one, nu won(e)</i>

- *won(e)* in the alternative phrases is person-neutral.
- *mu m-one* 'we ourselves' — the last trace of the old 1PL emphatic.

Why? Politeness.

2nd person avoid 'you'

negative face

- Distance the addressee.
- So the emphatic won.

1st person include 'you'

positive face

- Mark solidarity.
- So basic stayed and emphatic was reinterpreted.

Every affected category involves second person.

Brown & Levinson 1987

A verb meaning 'and'

k-

1s

-a-

'and'

-we

2s.O

kawe

'we two'

One form, three functions.

conjunction

pronoun

inclusory pronoun

Three ways to say 'you and I'

kikawe

I am acting — you join me

ki-k-a-we

1sg-1s-and-2sO

yenkawe

you are acting — I join you

yen-k-a-we

2sg-1s-and-2sO

monkawe

neither of us is primary

mon-k-a-we

1DU.INC-1s-and-2sO

Whoever comes first is primary.

Ten pronoun sets

Type	Set	Core Argument	Gloss	+ Possessive (Types VI–X)
I	simple basic	<i>ki</i>	'1SG'	<i>ki-nini</i>
II	emphatic / reflexive	<i>k-one</i>	'1S-EMPH'	<i>k-one-ni</i>
III	coordinative	<i>k-a-ne</i>	'1S-COORD-3sO'	<i>k-a-ne-ni</i>
IV	comitative	<i>ki-k-a-ne</i>	'1SG-1S-COM-3sO'	<i>ki-k-a-ne-ni</i>
V	emphatic comitative	<i>k-one-k-a-ne</i>	'1S-EMPH-1S-COM-3sO'	<i>k-one-k-a-ne-ni</i>

Five argument types, each with a possessive.
Every additional morpheme adds a conjunct or salience.

How productive is this?

130+

pronoun forms

- Every person pair.
- Singular with singular.
- Singular with plural.
- Plural with plural.
- Speakers coin new ones.
- Elders remember old forms.

A third open word class — with nouns and verbs.

Conjunction and pronoun in same sentence

firela

fish

y-a-ne

2/3s-and-3sO

asukla

prawn

'A fish and a prawn...

wu-y-a-ne

3sg-2/3s-and-3sO

n-ai-ne

3ns-be-CNT

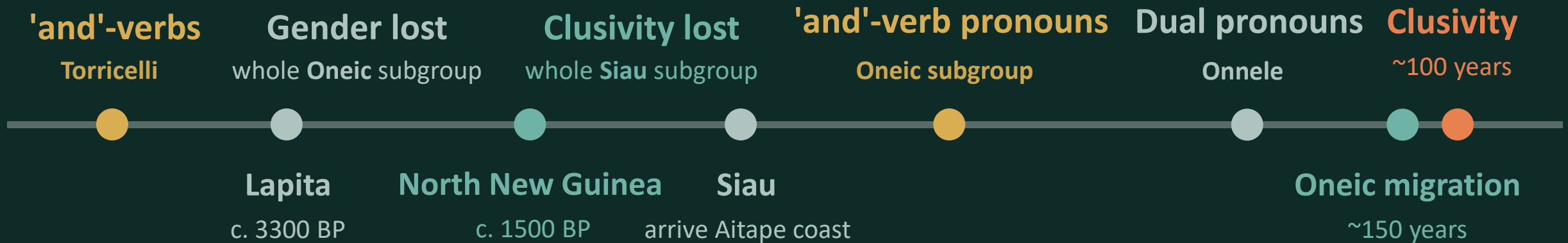
roma pulale

stone hole

...the two of them were in a hole in a stone.'

Deep Torricelli time depth

Torricelli differentiation: several millennia before Austronesian arrival.



Loss of gender early. Rise of clusivity recent.

Onnele! 'Big no!'

- Oneic gender loss: old, and not from contact with Siau languages.
- Onnele clusivity: recent, and internally motivated.
- Siau gender loss: early from contact with Torricelli languages to the east.
- North New Guinea Group lack of gender: persisted despite pervasive contact.

But earlier — before it had clusivity —
Onnele may have helped its neighbours lose theirs.

Thank you

Warm thanks to the Onnele communities who have welcomed me since 2003. Special thanks to Dominic Pusai (Goiniri dialect) for the extra time he gave to recording, transcribing, translating and discussing texts. I also thank the Onnele translation and literacy team (partnering with SIL-PNG's Aitape West cluster program) for sharing their insights: Joel Malan, Felix Soropo, Gibson Musi & Linda Domeka (Wolwale); Jonathan Mokou, Papson Kaiwe, Roselyn Pusai and Joel Pusai (Goiniri); James Panso, Rodney Ufa and Otto Perau (Romei); and Adrian Sanga (Barera). For stories and other natural texts: Scholar Pusai, Ruth Pusai, Moses & Susan Sanbo, Aknela Sanbo, Vero Ukani, Peter Ume, Herman Ume, Regina Yomun, Bonny Ukani, Cletus Saukera, Julie Saukera, Martin Wingolo, Pais Klasi, Peter Mawile, Scholar Yokai, William Turi and Rex Turi (Goiniri). Thanks to Matthew Dryer and Malcolm Ross for unpublished comparative work; to René van den Berg and Don Daniels for feedback at LSPNG 2016; and to Marian Klammer at Leiden. Funded in part by the Pike Center for Integrative Scholarship.

Questions I am still asking

- How recent is 'recent'?
- Dual and complex pronouns elsewhere in Oneic subfamily and Torricelli?
- Parallels elsewhere in PNG?

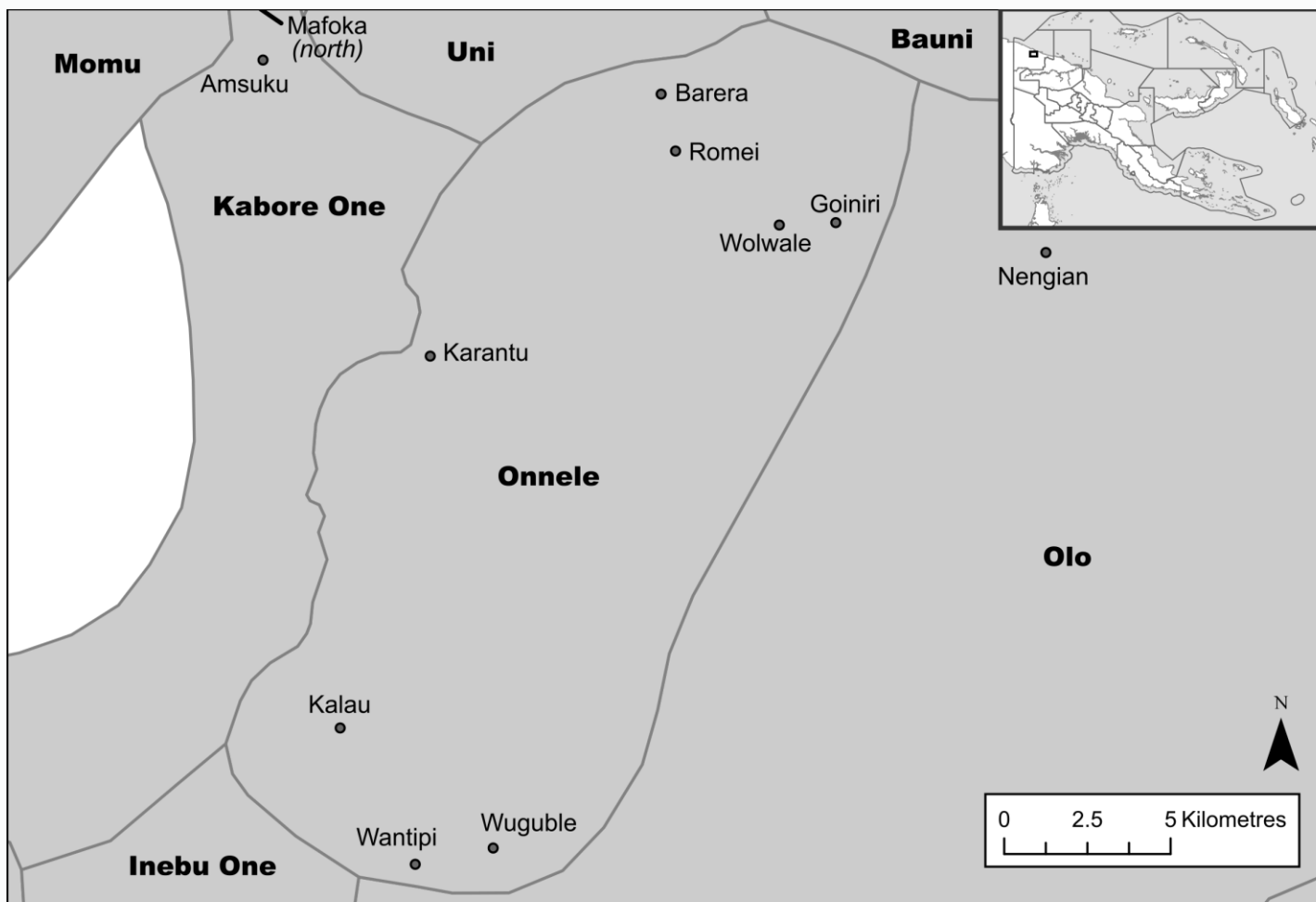
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Appendix

full paradigms, comparative tables and references

A1 · Onnele dialects and location

Northern One [onr], Aitape West Inland Region, Sandaun Province.



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Borders shown on this map represent language data. They do not reflect nor should they be used to make land claims.

Goiniri

29 km west of Aitape, 14 km south of the Sissano Lagoon — the first Onnele village on the Sepik Highway, and the source of every paradigm in this talk unless marked otherwise.

Eight village dialects

Goiniri · Wolwale · Romei · Barera · Karantu · Kalau · Wantipi · Wuguble. Goiniri, Wolwale, Romei and Barera lie within about 6 km of one another, and each is a distinct dialect — the differences are far greater than the local “we say r, they say l” summary. Following de Vries and Kulick (2025), the real dialect unit is probably the clan rather than the village.

Oneic subgroup

Onnele · Inebu · Kabore · Kwamtim · Molmo · Southern One · Seta · Seti — one long dialect chain whose extremes are only 28% cognate (Donohue 2000, p.c.). Amsuku and Mafoka may belong to Kabore One. Dryer (forthcoming) renames West Wapei → Oneic.

A2 · Basic free and bound pronouns

Onnele Goiniri.

Number	Person	Free pronoun	Subject prefix	impf enclitic	Bound category
SG	1	<i>ki</i>	k-	=ke	1 · singular
SG	2	<i>yene</i>	y- ~ w- ~ r-	=ye	2/3 · singular
SG	3	<i>wu</i>			2/3 · singular
PL (3+)	1.EXC	<i>mu</i>	m-	=me	1 · non-singular
PL (3+)	1.INC	<i>mone</i>			1 · non-singular
PL (3+)	2	<i>pone</i>	p-	=pe	2 · non-singular
PL (3+)	3	<i>nu</i>	n-	=ne	3 · non-singular

Free pronouns: sg / du / pl, where pl = three or more. Bound pronouns: singular / non-singular only — so a dual subject takes plural agreement.

Two syncretisms in the bound system: the subject prefix neutralises 2/3 singular, and one prefix m- covers both first-plural pronouns, so the clusivity contrast is invisible on the verb. The lexically-determined y- ~ w- ~ r- alternation is a reflex of the old gender system.

No dual appears here: duals and every multi-participant combination are built out of verb morphology (see A5–A6).

A3 · Emphatic pronouns, phrases and possessives

Romei has yene for Goiniri yene.

Person & no.	Basic	Emphatic	Emphatic phrase	Alternative phrase	Possessive
1s	<i>ki</i>	<i>k-one</i>	<i>ki k-one</i>	<i>ki wone</i>	<i>ki-ni~ni, k-one-ni</i>
2s	<i>yene</i>	—	—	<i>yene won</i>	<i>yene-ni</i>
3s	<i>wu</i>	<i>w-one</i>	<i>wu w-one</i>	—	<i>wu-ni~ni, w-one-ni</i>
1p.EXC	<i>mu</i>	—	<i>mu m-one</i>	—	<i>mu-ni~ni, m-one-ni</i>
1p.INC	<i>mone</i>	—	—	<i>mone won</i>	<i>mone-ni</i>
2p	<i>pone</i>	—	—	<i>pone won</i>	<i>pone-ni</i>
3p	<i>nu</i>	<i>n-one</i>	<i>nu n-one</i>	<i>nu wone</i>	<i>nu-ni~ni, n-one-ni</i>

Complementary distribution. Where the basic form is disyllabic (*yene*, *pone*, *mone*) the emphatic slot is empty; where the basic is monosyllabic (*ki*, *wu*, *mu*, *nu*) a disyllabic emphatic exists. Every category has a disyllabic form — but only ever one, in one column or the other.

A fourth emphatic, *m-one* '1p-emph', survives only inside the phrase *mu m-one*, and only with exclusive reference. **mone mone* with an inclusive emphatic sense is unattested.

won(e) in the alternative phrases is person-neutral: bimorphemic *w-one* '3s-emph' in isolation and with *wu*, but monomorphemic 'emph' elsewhere. The possessive *-ni* reduplicates on monosyllabic stems, so every possessive is trisyllabic.

A4 · Torricelli basic pronouns

Onnele column = Romei.

Person & no.	Proto-Oneic	Onnele basic	Onnele emphatic	Mafoka One	Molmo One	Seta	Seti
1s	<i>*ki</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>kone</i>	<i>kei</i>	<i>i / ene</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>ka</i>
2s	<i>*yo</i>	<i>yene</i>	—	<i>yene</i>	<i>yo / yine</i>	<i>yo</i>	<i>ay</i>
3s	<i>*wa</i>	<i>wu</i>	<i>wone</i>	<i>wo</i>	<i>wo / one</i>	<i>wo</i>	<i>wa</i>
1p.EXC	<i>*mo</i>	<i>mu</i>	—	<i>mini</i>	<i>mo</i>	<i>mo</i>	<i>mei</i>
1p.INC		<i>mone</i>	—	<i>mini wole</i>	<i>mine</i>		
2p	<i>*po</i>	<i>pone</i>	—	<i>pini</i>	<i>po / pine</i>	<i>po</i>	<i>pei</i>
3p	<i>*no</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>none</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>no / nine</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>nei</i>

Ross (2005b: 52) reconstructs Proto-West Wapei — what Dryer now calls Oneic — as **ki*, **yo*, **wa*, **mo*, **po*, **no*: all monosyllabic. This matches my own independent reconstruction. Mafoka, Molmo, Seta and Seti all keep monosyllabic basics; Molmo's *yine*, *one*, *pine* and *nine* are its emphatics (compare confirmed *ene* '1s.emph'), not its basics.

Proto-Torricelli had gender and no clusivity (Ross 2005a: 30–35). Onnele today has clusivity and no gender — it has inverted its inheritance on both counts. The full published table also gives Proto-Torricelli, Olo, Yis, Dia and Au.

A5 · Dual pronouns and prominence

Onnele Goiniri TGD §3.1.1, §5.1.3 (2018, rev. 2022).

Combination	Form	Short	Prominence	Tok Pisin
1SG + 2SG	<i>kikawe</i>	<i>kawe</i>	1SG primary — I am acting, you join me	yumitupela
2SG + 1SG	<i>yenkawe</i>	—	2SG primary — you are acting, I join you	yumitupela
1SG + 2SG	<i>monkawe</i>	—	neither primary — genuinely joint	yumitupela
1SG + 3SG	<i>kikane</i>	<i>kane</i>	1SG primary	mitupela
2SG + 3SG	<i>yenyane</i>	<i>yane</i>	2SG primary	yutupela
3SG + 3SG	<i>wuyane</i>	<i>yane</i>	3SG primary	tupela
3SG + 2SG	<i>wuyawe</i>	<i>yawe</i>	3SG primary	yutupela
3SG + 1SG	<i>wu yane ki</i>	—	<i>no dual — accompaniment phrase instead</i>	—

Three duals reference 1sg together with 2sg — *kikawe*, *yenkawe* and *monkawe* — differing only in which participant is construed as primary. *monkawe* says neither is.

There is no dual for 'he and I' with third person primary: third person cannot outrank first. Prominence is constrained by the same person and animacy hierarchies that govern the rest of the system.

The duals encode inclusive/exclusive too, by a route entirely separate from *mu* / *mone* — two layers of clusivity from two histories.

NOTE: the TGD's own basic-pronoun table lists *kikawe* under 1.EXC, but its prose and the §5.1.3 matrix both make *kikawe* = 1sg+2sg and *kikane* = 1sg+3sg. The matrix is followed here.

A6 · The full combinatorial matrix

Onnele Goiniri: a basic pronoun (rows) combined with every other person/number category (columns). Long forms only.

	+ 1SG	+ 2SG	+ 3SG	+ 1PL	+ 2PL	+ 3PL
ki '1SG'	—	<i>kikawe</i>	<i>kikane</i>	—	<i>konkape</i>	<i>kikakle</i>
yene '2SG'	<i>yenkawe</i>	<i>yenyawe</i>	<i>yenyane</i>	<i>yenyame</i>	—	<i>yenyakle</i>
wu '3SG'	<i>wu yane ki</i>	<i>wuyawe</i>	<i>wuyane</i>	<i>wuyame</i>	<i>wuyape</i>	<i>wuyakle</i>
mu '1PL.EXC'	—	<i>mumawe</i>	<i>mumane</i>	—	<i>mumape</i>	<i>mumakle</i>
mone '1PL.INC'	—	<i>monkawe</i>	<i>mone mane wu</i>	—	—	<i>monmakle</i>
pone '2PL'	<i>pone pane ki</i>	—	<i>pone pane wu</i>	<i>ponpame</i>	—	<i>ponpakle</i>
nu '3PL'	<i>nu nake ki</i>	<i>nu nane yene</i>	<i>nu nane wu</i>	<i>nuname</i>	<i>nunape</i>	<i>nunakle</i>

Over 130 pronoun forms in the full system; at least forty attested complex pronouns. Most cells also have a short form — *kikawe* ~ *kawe*, *wuyane* ~ *yane*, *mumakle* ~ *makle* — and the third referent can always be spelled out with a following free pronoun: *ki kape pone*, *wu yame mone*. Greyed cells are accompaniment phrases rather than single compounds; the word/phrase boundary is exactly what is in flux. The set cannot be listed exhaustively: speakers readily coin and interpret forms no one has recorded, which is the argument for treating Onnele pronouns as a third open word class.

A7 · Natural-text examples

Onnele Goiniri.

- (1) **Kaire** **wongke** **firela** **y-a-ne** **asukla** **wuyane** **n-ai-ne** **roma** **pulale** ...
 day one fish 3s-and-3s0 prawn both.of.them 3p-be-cnt.3p stone hole

'One day a fish and a prawn were both in a hole in a stone ...'

y-a-ne conjoins two nouns; two words later wuyane, the identical material, stands alone as 'the two of them'. Same root, same affixes, one clause apart — nothing but distribution separates them.

- (2) **Mi** **empo** **ki-k-a-ne** **Jonathan** **m-eli** **Ukarumpa** **m-em** **DYL kos.**
 story about 1sg-1s-com-3s0 Jonathan 1p-come.up Ukarumpa 1p-get DYL course

'The story about me along with another, Jonathan, coming up to Ukarumpa to take the DYL course.'

An inclusory pronoun: ki-k-a-ne already encodes both participants, and Jonathan is named to resolve the third-person slot. Note m-eli — the verb is first person non-singular: a dual subject agrees as plural, because the bound system has no dual.

Ordering is significant, and prosody often signals how far grammaticalisation has gone. Whether a given token is a compound pronoun or a serial verb construction is, in many cases, genuinely undecidable.

A8 · Gender across Torricelli and Skou

What the Siau languages met as they moved west.

Language	Family	Position	Gender-indexing targets
Bukiyip	Torricelli	east	all six word classes surveyed
Abu' Arapesh	Torricelli	east	all six word classes surveyed
Walman	Torricelli	central	all six word classes surveyed
Olo	Torricelli	Onnele's neighbour	pronouns, verbs, demonstratives, numerals
Bauni, Uni, Bouni	Skou	the lagoon	pronouns, verb subjects and objects
Onnele (all Oneic)	Torricelli	far northwest	none
Kombioic, Urim, Elkei	Torricelli	central	none — the other three red pockets
Malol, Arop, Sissano, Sera	Siau	the coast	none — and clusivity lost as well

Only 4 of 19 sample Torricelli languages show complete absence of gender across pronouns, verbs, demonstratives, adjectives, numerals and nouns (Jódar-Sánchez & Allasonnière-Tang 2024: 357). Gender is reconstructed at the root of the family.

Dryer (p.c. 2026) has gender data for every Torricelli language except Ambrak: all the Palei, Maimai, Arapeshan and Marienberg languages, all the Wapei other than Elkei, plus Urat, Wom and Monumbo have gender. None of the Kombioic languages, nor Oneic, nor Urim has gender. Ambrak was grouped with three other Palei languages by Laycock and probably has gender too.

Why the Siau never adopted gender: Ross (2013: 32) gives two routes to simplification in small, tightly-knit communities — child-driven irregularity without adult correction, and, with shared knowledge and face-to-face interaction, talk that becomes less explicit and develops specific lexical items and suppletion instead. The Siau took the second: gender is specifiable lexically, never grammatically.

A9 · Ten pronoun sets, one to six morphemes

Type	Label	Core argument	Gloss	Possessive (types VI–X)
I	Simple basic (monomorphemic)	<i>ki</i>	'1sG'	<i>ki-nini</i>
II	Emphatic / reflexive (bimorphemic)	<i>k-one</i>	'1s-emph'	<i>k-one-ni</i>
III	Complex coordinative (trimorphemic)	<i>k-a-ne</i>	'1s-coord-3sO'	<i>k-a-ne-ni</i>
IV	Complex comitative (quadrimorphemic)	<i>ki-k-a-ne</i>	'1sG-1s-com-3sO'	<i>ki-k-a-ne-ni</i>
V	Complex emphatic comitative (pentamorphemic)	<i>k-one-k-a-ne</i>	'1s-emph-1s-com-3sO'	<i>k-one-k-a-ne-ni</i>

Phrasal extensions (not separate sets)

ki-k-a-ne wu (5 morphemes)

k-one-k-a-ne wu (6)

ki-k-one-k-a-ne wu (7)

Demonstratives share the pronominal consonantism

mee 'prox' beside m- '1ns'; namo 'med' and nanri 'dist' beside n- '3ns'.

They add one further parameter, distance.

Each step up adds an argument — a pronominal 'valency' increase (hedged: van den Berg objects that valency belongs to clause argument structure; the scalar analogy with transitivity is what is intended).

Between the sixteen free and bound pronoun sets, the paradigm indexes thirteen grammatical categories: number (seven attested values: sg, du [sg+sg], ns, pl [3+], sg+pl, pl+sg, pl+pl), person (ten, including 1+2, 1–2, 1+2+3), clusivity, animacy, reflexive, emphatic, coordinative, comitative, possessive, prominence, subject, object, continuous aspect.

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