



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Uruangnirin (Indonesia) – Language Snapshot

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ABSTRACT

Uruangnirin is an Austronesian language of the Tanimbar-Bomberai group spoken by around 400 people on the Karas Islands in Indonesia. Uruangnirin language documentation is currently underway, with almost 40 hours of materials, more than 13 of which are translated and glossed, archived with the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR). This paper gives a brief overview of the location of the language, the sociolinguistic situation, and previous research and current scholarship. It also offers some observations about life on Karas and some pointers to the online corpus.

Keywords: Uruangnirin language; West Bomberai; Austronesian; Indonesia; descriptive linguistics; corpus

Language Name: Uruangnirin(g), Rwangnirin(g), Wangnirin(g)

Language Family: Austronesian > Malayo-Polynesian (MP) > Central Eastern Malayo-Polynesian (CEMP) > Tanimbar-Bomberai

ISO 639-3 Code: urn

Glottolog Code: urua1244

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Population: 400 (author's estimate)

Location: the two eastern Karas Islands, Fakfak regency, West Papua province, Indonesia (~-3.428864, 132.747136)

Vitality rating: Endangered (Eberhard et al. 2024)

1. LANGUAGE IDENTIFICATION

Uruangnirin (urn, urua1244) is an Austronesian language spoken by around 400 people in eastern Indonesia. Speakers of the language typically refer to it as Rwangniring (but both the initial *r* and the final *g* are optional). Most speakers of Uruangnirin live on the two eastern Karas Islands, which are located off the west coast of Bomberai Peninsula in Fakfak regency in West Papua province. These islands have two villages each, and Uruangnirin is the main indigenous language in all villages.¹ The villages on the northernmost island are Tarak and Tuburuasa (alternative spellings are Tuberuasa or Tuberwasak, called *Nusa* in Uruangnirin). The villages on the southernmost island are Faur (alternative spelling Faor) and Kiaba. The location of the islands and villages can be seen in Figure 1. There are some slight differences between the Uruangnirin spoken on the northern and southern islands. The main difference is that in

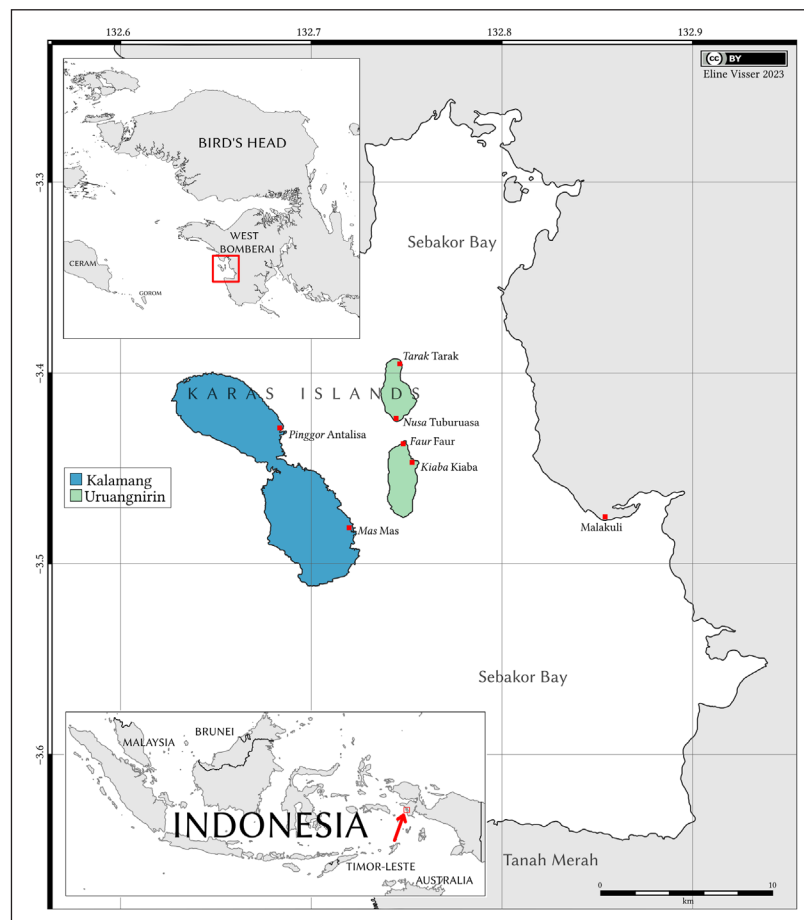


Figure 1: The location of the Karas Islands and their languages. Village names are given in Uruangnirin (italics) and Bahasa Indonesia (regular typeface).

¹ The Karas Islands consist of three islands in total. They have no individual names, so the village names are sometime used to refer to them. The westernmost island is the biggest, and is the home of the language Kalamang described in Visser (2022).

Tarak and Tuburuasa on the northern island, /ŋg/ clusters are simplified to /g/: they say *wagi* ‘give’ and *igar* ‘float’, while speakers in Faur and Kiaba on the southern island say *wanggi* and *inggar*, respectively. At least two words differ between the northern and the southern island: the word for ‘dog’ is *lasi* in the north and *ifora* in the south, and the word for ‘axe’ is *bil* in the north and *wewar* in the south. Uruangnirin is classified as a Tanimbar-Bomberai language, a subgroup directly under Malayo-Polynesian (Grimes & Edwards in press). The estimate of 400 speakers, from a 1983 SIL survey (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2024), seems to be roughly correct today. A detailed speaker count for Kiaba, the smallest of the four villages, was performed by myself together with two informants, who counted 61 fluent speakers and 27 non-fluent speakers. See Section 2 for further comments about language vitality.

Many Uruangnirin speakers feel a close connection to the speakers of Onin (oni, onin1245, spoken on the northwestern tip of Bomberai Peninsula), and some go as far as to say Uruangnirin is but a variant of Onin. This is not warranted by the limited linguistic evidence (Grimes & Edwards in press; Smits & Voorhoeve 1992a, 1992b; Voorhoeve 1975). I have recorded some Onin (from two different speakers, one of whom speaks the Patipi variant), but these recordings await analysis.

2. VITALITY AND LINGUISTIC NEIGHBORHOOD

I assess Uruangnirin to be a Shifting language (level 7 on the EGIDS scale, Lewis and Simons 2010), based on observations during 3.5 months fieldwork in Kiaba. There is a sharp decline in fluency among people born roughly between 1990 and 2000, at least in Kiaba. No one born after 2000 can be counted as a fluent speaker. There are very few households with two fluent Uruangnirin-speaking parents and children born after 2000, but even in those households the children are not raised in Uruangnirin. I classify as non-fluent those speakers who have a good passive command of the language. Fluent Uruangnirin speakers do not necessarily shift to Papuan Malay (pmy, papu1250) when non-fluent speakers join the conversation, but they are not expected to actively contribute, although they can express themselves in a simple way in Uruangnirin. In one-on-one communication non-fluent speakers are typically addressed in Papuan Malay, and they respond likewise. Almost all other people (not counted as Uruangnirin speakers) have minimal knowledge of Uruangnirin. The vast majority is born to at least one Uruangnirin-speaking parent, so they typically understand some of the language (e.g., simple commands and greetings), know a few dozen common words, and can say a handful of standard phrases. They cannot freely create simple clauses. They communicate in Papuan Malay with both elders and peers.

The informants involved in the speaker count in Kiaba report that the language situation in Tarak is slightly better, because in that village fewer of the young people have moved away for higher education. From my observations in Kiaba I have noticed that even many of the young people born after 1990 that have not left the island for higher education do not speak Uruangnirin, although note that almost everyone leaves the island temporarily for at least three years of junior high school.

Uruangnirin has no written tradition and is not used as an administrative language. When asked, people readily write Uruangnirin words and texts without problems using Indonesian (ind, indo1316) orthography, which fits Uruangnirin phonology well.² Now, with the spread of cheap smartphones and internet connections, some Uruangnirin may be found on social media such as Facebook.

² Indonesian (or Bahasa Indonesia) is the official language of Indonesia. It is a standardized variant of Malay. Papuan Malay is a cover term for the local varieties of Malay used in Papua and West Papua provinces in Indonesia. Uruangnirin speakers have learned Indonesian in school and hear it on national television, and most people are able to read government communication in Indonesian. They use a variant of Papuan Malay for daily communication with non-Uruangnirin speakers. Karas Islanders themselves do not make the distinction between Indonesian and Papuan Malay.

All Uruangnirin speakers are fluent in Papuan Malay. In Kiaba, there is a high command of Geser-Gorom (ges, gese1240), a language spoken in eastern Maluku. This is an area with which the Karas Islands have been in contact for generations and with whose people they have intermarried. Another language spoken by many is Kalamang (kgv, kara1499), since many inhabitants of Kiaba have family in Mas, a Kalamang-speaking village of the Karas Islands. None of the languages besides Papuan Malay are transmitted to children. The language of communication in mixed marriages is Papuan Malay or Uruangnirin.

Fluent Uruangnirin speakers seem to have a positive attitude towards their language. In a sociolinguistic questionnaire, nine out of 21 responded that they think Uruangnirin is the most beautiful language (nine others opted for Indonesian, and two for Kalamang). To the question which language they think is the most useful, Indonesian got 13 votes, Uruangnirin six, English three, and Kalamang one (some people responded with more than one language). I have never seen Uruangnirin speakers hide the fact that they speak the language.

3. EXISTING LITERATURE AND CURRENT RESEARCH

There is no existing literature that focuses solely on Uruangnirin. The Uruangnirin-speaking islands are first mentioned in works about European explorers (Giglioli 1874: 449; Robidé van der Aa 1879: 158).³ The first word list of Uruangnirin (recorded as “Faur”) appears in Galis (1955), and subsequent word lists and/or classifications are published in Voorhoeve (1975), Smits and Voorhoeve (1992a, 1992b) and Grimes and Edwards (In press). Products of a pilot study include a word list and a grammar questionnaire, which are archived at Lund University’s Humanities Lab (Visser 2019). This study is now superseded by the ongoing documentation of Uruangnirin archived at ELAR (Visser et al. 2023). Two field trips, in 2022/2023 and in 2024, yielded 38 hours of recordings. Thirteen hours are transcribed, translated into English and Papuan Malay, and glossed. A study of differential subject marking in Uruangnirin and a grammar sketch of Uruangnirin are in preparation (Faghiri & Visser ms. and Visser ms.).

4. LIFE ON KARAS

The Uruangnirin-speaking community is largely comprised of farmers and fishermen. They live in four villages, each with their own village head, following Indonesian social organization. The kinship system is patrilineal. Close relationships outside the nuclear family are maintained with parents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. It is common for three generations to live in one house. Resources are often pooled within the extended family or even the whole village for large undertakings like building a house or for expensive events like tertiary education or marriage. All households have a vegetable garden, and gardening is a shared activity for men and women. Fishing from boats and diving is mostly done by men, though far from all men fish or dive regularly. Other sea-related activities are fishing with nets in shallow sea, fishing from the dock, and collecting shells. These activities are mainly performed by women and children. All families have nutmeg gardens on the Karas Islands or on the mainland, which provide a main source of income. The community is Muslim, observing many Islamic customs though mixing them with local ones. The majority live in concrete houses with corrugated iron roofs. There is no known art. The skills for other material culture, such as woven products and wooden canoes, are still known by some but are on the verge of being superseded by purchased modern materials. There is no motorized transport on land in any of the villages.

³ Glottolog also lists Von Rosenberg (1878) and Ribbe (1903) as sources that mention Uruangnirin, but I find no reference to Karas or Uruangnirin-speaking villages therein.

5. MEDIA

In this section, I want to highlight some of the Uruangnirin materials in the ELAR corpus (Visser et al., 2023). A showreel inviting viewers in to the corpus can be found as an embedded video below, as well as on its landing page at <https://www.elararchive.org/dk06810742> (and archived at <http://hdl.handle.net/2196/db439a6c-2473-4c16-9801-cc071a32bc34>). All items in the collection can be filtered by among other things genre (e.g., narrative or notes), topic (e.g., agriculture or history), keyword (e.g., fruit or government), and file type. Most files are open access, though a few of the files can only be accessed once the user creates an account with ELAR.



This is a showreel with short clips from recordings from the Uruangnirin language documentation, archived at <http://hdl.handle.net/2196/db439a6c-2473-4c16-9801-cc071a32bc34>. For the full video, visit the online journal at ldjournal.org.

Recordings that address Uruangnirin culture, customs, and religion include *Circumcision*, *Collecting the bride price*, *A demon in the mosque* (about the rituals to protect the village from further demon attacks), *Maulud*, *Feeding a child for the first time*, and *Traditions related to the arrival of a new wife*. An extensive questionnaire that considers many aspects of material and immaterial culture is archived as *Questionnaire CultureRumah*.

There are many recordings that show or are about daily activities or making a living. Recordings about planting, harvesting, and selling nutmeg can be found with help of the tag “nutmeg”. There are two recordings about planting and harvesting chili, and several about pili nut production. How people work in their gardens can be seen in two other recordings. *Looking for shells at low tide* and *Fishing* show some of the sea-related activities. Food preparation can be seen in *Cooking a lunch* and *Cooking an evening meal*.

The sociolinguistic questionnaires referenced in Section 2 are archived under “Sociolinguistic questionnaires”. A word list with pictures, a word list app, and recordings of all words in the word list can be found under the tag “lexicon”. Ten Pear Film narrations (Chafe 1975) can be found by

searching for “Pear film” or ticking the box “bicycle” under Keywords. In addition, the corpus contains recordings made with the help of picture and video stimuli, and elicitation sessions that focus on diverse phonological and grammatical topics. These can be found by ticking the box “elicitation” under “Genre”.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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