In the late 1980s there was a general perception in both Indonesia and the Netherlands that not enough was known about Indonesia’s easternmost province, Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). In particular, it was felt that poor knowledge of the cultural and linguistic situation of the island’s many different population groups made it difficult to target socioeconomic development programmes. For this reason, the project ‘Upgrading of Irianese scholars in the field of Irian Jaya studies’ (IRIS) was launched jointly by three organizations: the Irian Jaya Study Centre (IJSC) in Jayapura, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) in Jakarta, and the Projects Division of the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania (DSALCUL), Faculty of Arts, Leiden University.

The IRIS project began in 1991 as an Indonesian–Dutch academic programme for documentation, education, and research. In March 1992 Dutch participation in the IRIS project was modified; LIPI was to continue with the educational activities, while the Dutch counterpart would focus on the publication of source materials. It was against this background that W.A.L. Stokhof, director of the Projects Division, and J. Miedema, coordinator of the Irian Jaya Studies project, started laying plans for new research activities in Irian Jaya.

A preliminary classification of Irian Jaya studies in the Netherlands in the early 1990s not only identified considerable gaps in knowledge, but also concluded that the various disciplines had not kept up with developments in Papua New Guinea. It was felt that Dutch scholars could play a significant role in updating knowledge of the cultures, history, languages, and territory of (West) Papua. In their work they would be able to draw on the wealth of unprocessed Dutch source material present in Dutch and Indonesian archives; they would also be able to contribute their specific knowledge of the area, and benefit from individual and institutional contacts between Dutch and Indonesian scholars.

This led to a research project, ‘Irian Jaya studies; A programme for interdisciplinary research’ (ISIR), which ran from 1993 to 2001.

As an interuniversity and multidisciplinary research project, ISIR was
sponsored by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), a governmental institution operating within the framework of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). ISIR aimed to increase and integrate knowledge in the social and natural sciences, particularly linguistics and anthropology (including ethnohistory), as well as demography, government administration, archaeology, botany (including ethnobotany), and geology. The reason for choosing the Bird’s Head Peninsula lay in the conviction that such a project could produce good results only if it was based in a specific area.

To complement the Dutch expertise available in anthropology and linguistics, various scholars were recruited to participate in the project. Initially, it was intended that IRIS graduates would participate in the ISIR project. Unfortunately, however, administrative and financial problems made this impossible (see also Vos 2001:121-7).

We would like to thank all the colleagues who participated in the ISIR project either directly or by presenting conference papers. For their names, we refer the reader not only to the present book, but also to three collected volumes: Ger P. Reesink 1996b; Gert-Jan Bartstra 1998, and Jelle Miedema, Cecilia Ode, and Rien A.C. Dam 1998.

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Map 1. The East Indonesia: New Guinea region. In grey shading the exposed continental shelf areas during periods of low sea level.