

KELABIT NAMES AND TITLES

SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS



JANE WONG KON LING

Kertas Kadangkala Bil.5
Occasional Paper No.5

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**Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning,
Universiti Malaysia Sabah
Kota Kinabalu
2005**

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Jane Wong Kon Ling
First Printing *Cetakan Pertama*, 2005

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Wong, Jane Kon Ling, 1968-

Kelabits names and titles: semantics and pragmatics / Jane Wong Kon Ling.

ISBN 983-2641-10-1

1. Kelabit (Malaysian People)--Name. 2. Kelabit (Malaysian People)--Language. 3. Ethnology--Sarawak---Social life and custom. I. Title. II. Series.

305.899923059522

Published in Malaysia by/*Diterbitkan di Malaysia oleh:*

Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa,

Universiti Malaysia Sabah,

Beg Berkunci 2073, 88999 Kota Kinabalu,
Sabah, Malaysia

Printed by/*Dicetak oleh:*

SQS Printing Sdn. Bhd. (Co. No. 144319-D)

No.4, 10A & 10B, Mosque Valley, Jalan Masjid Lama,

Bandaran Jaya, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

P.o.Box 20293, 88759 Luyang, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Photo Courtesy of/*Gambar oleh:*

Maran Tellian, Mutang Paturan and Bilcher Bala

*To my beloved
husband, Bilcher;
Son, Bellamy &
daughter, Belphoebe
for
bringing
joy, light, hope and love
into my life.*

PREFACE

This occasional paper is a result of my curiosity, interest and research on the relationship between the language and culture of the Kelabit society. Being married to a Kelabit, there are many characteristics of the Kelabit which strike me as an 'outsider'. Among other elements that attracted my academic curiosity are their significant naming system and the often-confusing complex system of address and reference.

Names have different semantic and pragmatic meanings, while titles on the other hand are sociolinguistic and pragmatic rather than semantic as can be seen in other studies done on names and titles such as in English, French or Polish culture. Generally, age and gender play important roles in the semantic aspect of names, while marital status plays the most important role in determining the titles of an individual. In the Kelabit society, names are not distinguished by age, but rather by gender, marital status, generation and social class. As these factors in a person change through time and experience, the Kelabits change their names several times during their lifetime. The Kelabit titles on one hand do not merely indicate marital status, but also suggest whether the couple has children as well as the gender of their first-born. Hence, this paper focuses on the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the names and titles which are culturally specific to the Kelabit society by using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory with concepts such as 'mother' and 'father', and other limited semantic primitive words such as 'I', 'you', 'someone', 'something', 'good', 'bad', 'want' and 'like' to explicate differences in abstract features.

The research was carried out in four main focal areas namely Kampung Baru, Bario Asal, Long Dano and Miri City. The informants, 40 couples in all, were interviewed for the purpose of extracting personal data such as their names and also why such names were given to them. Questionnaires regarding the Kelabit titles or terms of address and reference were also given to all the informants on when, why and how the Kelabits should be referred to and addressed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The information put together in this occasional paper is based on research and field trips conducted in Miri and the Kelabit highlands between 2000-2002. Besides thanking Almighty God for giving me faith and strength to complete my research project up until the publication of this paper, I am also indebted to many people along the way.

To the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Mohd. Noh Dalimin and the Research Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sabah, thank you for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this research through the availability of funds and for nominating this research for the Best Research Award 2004 UMS. To the Publication Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sabah, thank you for giving me the opportunity to publish my work and to fund its publication.

To the Acting Dean, Dr. Andreas Totu and the former Dean, Prof. Ahmat Adam and the staff of the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, I'm thankful for their encouragement and support.

To all the Kelabit informants in Miri, Bario Asal, Kampung Baru and Long Dano, I am grateful and thankful for their help and hospitality during my stay in the Kelabit Highlands. Especially to the late Dawin Raja @ Sinah Ribuh Ulun for her hospitality even in the illness of her last days.

To my husband, *Tamabu'* Bilcher, I am thankful for his assistance and support throughout the research and writing of this occasional paper. And to my mum, Christina; my *abu'*, Bellamy and my *amu'*, Belphoebe, I am grateful for their love, understanding and support.

To my colleagues Susan Sim, Margaret Chee and Mary Ellen Gidah, thank you very much for proof reading and editing my drafts, and to Dr. Ismail Ibrahim, thank you for designing the graphics.

To the all the members of the Editorial Board of the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, and especially to the chief editor Prof. Mohd. Sarim Hj. Mustajab, I am thankful

to him for always encouraging and giving me the opportunity to write and publish my work.

To all, I'm truly thankful.

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October 2005

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