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THE IBAN VERBAL SYMBOLS AS DESCRIPTIVE INSTRUMENT IN IBAN FOLK TALES

Asmah Haji Omar

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Iban is not an exception. Its folk tales, a considerable number of which have been published by the Borneo Literature Bureau, are a testimony to the skill of the speakers of the language in using it for the purpose of narration and description.

In this paper, the descriptive power of Iban is discussed as illustrated in three topics: personal names, manliness and femininity, and references to places.

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IBAN NAMES

Iban names are the first testimony to the fondness of describing among the Iban people. An Iban usually has more than one name. The addition of secondary or honorary names (known as *ensumbar*) or nicknames (*julok*) is motivated by a change in the passage of the individual's life, such as illness, marriage, change of place of abode, victory in war, skill in doing something etc. For example, a man by the name of *Keling* has this name, *Keling Gerasi Nading Berani Kempang* (Keling the very brave son of Gerasi Nading). This long name describes the strength and prowess of Keling.

Keling, a figure which symbolises manliness in Iban culture, has many other names, such as *Keling Gerasi Nading Berani Kering di pelimping buku tulang* (Keling son of Gerasi Nading who has strong bones), *Keling Jelingan ke betugau maioh rambang* (Keling who has left and divorced many wives),

Keling Aji ke berani tau serang (the Master Keling who is brave and good in battles). *Keling manok biring Sempidan* (Keling the red fighting cock and the pheasant).

All these names describe Keling's various manly attributes, and most of them refer to his prowess and bravery. However, the name that refers to his many divorces can also be considered to be an attribute to his manly prowess, viz. the conquest of women. The word *Jelingan* in that name may stand for a Malay loan. If this is the case, then the name concerned can be translated as "Keling the Romeo who has left and divorced many wives."

When *Keling* disguised himself as someone else, he gave himself the name *Kelupa Gerama Rangkai*, *Galang Melintang di Nanga Sungai*. This name or *ensumbar* describes him as the dried shell of a crab that spans across the river mouth. Although he compares himself to the crab shell, his prowess is not diminished because the shell is not an ordinary one. It must be enormous in size to be able to span across the river mouth.

A chief who was an ally of *Keling* in the story *Kumang Ngiga Lintum* is called *Raja Segunggong Pangerempong Antu Tuah*, *Seganggai Pemegai Antu Limpah*. This is an indication of the man's power over supernatural beings, good and evil, which play an important part in the life of the Iban.

Kumang, *Keling's* wife, symbolises the epitome of feminine beauty and femininity. Among her names is *Kumang bunga ketunsong* (*Kumang* the hibiscus flower), *Kumang Jerenang Bintang* (*Kumang* who points at the stars), *Endu langit Dayang Kumang* (*Kumang*, the lady of the heavens).

Her daughter-in-law who is said to be as beautiful as herself is known as *Endu Segadu Telu Burong* (*Segadu* the bird egg lady), *Kumang Seregang Moa Puchong* (*Kumang* Seregang with a bottle like face).

MANLINESS AND FEMININITY

The Iban concept of manliness and femininity revolves around *Keling* and *Kumang* respectively. The Iban hero should be handsome (*sigat*), knowledgeable about many things (*bisi benda penemu*), strong (*kering*) and brave (*berani*), and good hearted (*bisi pemanah ati*). A handsome man is at times described as follows:—

"- - - gamal nyau berandah mandang rumah, nyau berimbas mandang babas." (The countenance is like the verandah when one looks at the house, it is like a cleared land when one looks at the jungle.

Panau, or white spots caused by the dryness of the skin, is considered as a feature that characterises the handsomeness of an Iban man.

"*Panau padat iya nyau baka indu lalat inggap nepan, panau bangi iya nyau baka mata keti dachin inta.*" (the thick panau is like the mother fly that alights on the skin, the panau on the forehead is like the weight of the scale). (*Kumang Ngiga Lintum*, p. 88)

A man's prowess is manifested in his voice, body, movement, as well as in his manner of eating, drinking, smoking and sleeping. and in carrying out a task entrusted to him.