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Malay Kinship Terms and Their Relationship to the Formation of Social Identity in West Kalimantan, Indonesia

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SUBMISSION TRACK

Received: December 24, 2025

Final Revision: April 06, 2026

Accepted: April 08, 2026

Available Online: April 15, 2026

KEYWORDS

Ethnolinguistics, kinship terms, social identity, Malay community, West Kalimantan

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A B S T R A C T

While previous studies on ethnic identity in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, have provided invaluable insights into the region's complex political, geographical, and macro-social dynamics, they have largely overlooked the ethnolinguistic dimension of everyday life, particularly its micro-social aspects, such as the use of kinship terms. This study addresses the internal heterogeneity of Malay communities by examining kinship terms and their role in shaping social identity in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. A linguistic ethnographic approach within the framework of Social Identity Theory is employed to analyse how these kinship terms function. Data was collected across the region of West Kalimantan, involving interviews with 33 Malay informants. In conclusion, there are various forms of kinship terms used by the Malay community in West Kalimantan, demonstrating significant geographical variation. The diversity of Malay kinship terms in this region indicates that kinship terms function literally as markers of lineage and kinship relations, and as a means for social categorisation, cultural affiliation, and identity negotiation. This reflects social-historical processes and inter-ethnic relations, and symbolically articulates identity amongst the Malay community. These findings contribute to ethnolinguistic theory by affirming that kinship terms constitute a reflexive social practice that shapes communal life in both literal and symbolic dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

Kinship terms are often viewed as a standard form of a community. Literally, certain terms are attached to certain communities, without considering the possibility of social interaction and social aspects of society. However, as part of the social system of society, kinship terms are more than just literal; they are also symbolic. Recent linguistic studies show that kinship terms play a role in the construction of identity in everyday practice (Epp & Price, 2008; Jenkins, 1994; Kellerhals et al., 2002). For example, the concept of kinship in Hindu and Arab societies is more than just a

blood relationship; it also reflects an individual's identity and position in the social system of society (Suryanarayan & Khalil, 2021). Similarly, in Turkish society, the term kinship reflects the semantic, historical, and cultural relationships that make up group solidarity (Sagdieva et al., 2019).

Ball (2018) argues that the use of kinship terms is part of reflexive and performative practices. Kinship terms have become part of fluid identity practices that can change depending on social context and interaction (Kellerhals et al., 2002).

This concept is in line with Schultermandl &

Rieser (2021), who state that kinship is a form of performative ownership. In other words, kinship is not only related to genealogical ties but also to creating social affiliations. One of their key ideas is “kinship as a critical idiom”, in which kinship is used to reframe membership, expand family categories, and negotiate ethnic boundaries and identities in pluralistic societies.

The term kinship is not limited to biological relationships alone; its symbolic or fictive dimension is also important in the social system. In anthropology and sociology, the concept of symbolic kinship refers to a social bond that is not based on blood ties or marriage (Abram & Lien, 2023; Milanova et al., 2024). This phenomenon, theorised as elective kinship or chosen relative, refers to family ties that are socially constructed, independent of biological or legal relationships (Mitchell & Evans, 2025; Wallace & Atkins, 1960). The use of kinship terms such as ‘Uncle’ and ‘Aunt’ in Western and Asian societies serves as an example demonstrating that kinship terms are more than merely a reflection of family relationships; they also symbolically denote elders (Gusnawaty et al., 2022). This illustrates linguistic mechanisms at work in the service of social identity. Speakers incorporate other groups into their own, reproducing identity similarities through language practices (Click et al., 2025). Within the framework of SIT theory, these kinship terms exist in two dimensions – literal and symbolic (Schneider, 2014). In this context, kinship terms are used to strengthen group cohesion.

Meanwhile, at the symbolic level, kinship terms transcend blood ties, functioning as a linguistic resource for establishing social relationships, politeness, as well as identification and comparison. From this perspective, kinship terms become highly significant in the processes of social categorisation, identification, and comparison, as conceptualised by Tajfel. The term symbolic kinship allows for the negotiation of group boundaries, whereby speakers can include non-relatives in the symbolic domain so that they become part of the ‘in-group’. These

dimensions indicate that kinship terms are used as a means of constructing and maintaining identity.

This study employs the SIT approach introduced by Tajfel (1978). According to this theory, social identity is formed through three processes: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison (Figure 1). In the process of social categorisation, individuals create identity categories of ‘self’ or ‘us’ and ‘others’, and these categories are then used to determine whether others belong to the same group. Ultimately, individuals compare this identification with out-groups to construct social identity. This framework is used as a paradigm to analyse identity formation in multi-ethnic environments experiencing latent rivalry, such as West Kalimantan (Dewantara et al., 2024; Ruslan et al., 2025).

To examine kinship terms within the Malay community in West Kalimantan, the researcher employed the Social Identity Theory approach (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and a pragmatic approach in ethnolinguistics (Riley, 2007). This combination of approaches was employed because kinship terms not only denote genealogical relationships but also regulate social interaction, maintain interpersonal bonds, and express a shared identity (Ball, 2018). Kinship terms, as used in society, function as performative elements that reveal family lineage and cultural affiliation. Berg-Nordlie (2022) states that kinship is linked to social resources within social relationships. This is also consistent with Read’s (2018, p. 1) observation that kinship, “is interwoven with other social systems such as religion, economics, and politics, providing a means to express forms of social organisation.” Evidence from Marwari, India, as presented by Goswami & Shougrakpam (2025), indicates that kinship terms signify respect both within blood ties and towards wealthier individuals. This kinship also strengthens social cohesion. Similarly, Gusnawaty et al. (2022) express the same in English, terms like uncle and aunt embody deep-rooted social norms regarding gender. The variability in kinship terminology across cultures confirms that kinship



Figure 1. Mental process of social identity formation

is shaped by marriage rules, linguistic affiliations, and social practices, rather than following a universal evolutionary model (Passmore & Jordan, 2020; Rácz et al., 2020).

Within the SIT framework, kinship terminology plays a vital role in shaping and reinforcing social identity. Historically, Malay hegemony in the archipelago gave rise to the concept of “masuk Melayu” or become Malay, old Malay (ancient Malay language), and debates about the use of Dayak terms. Similarly, Dayak identity emerged from a long struggle for recognition in the multiethnic situation in this area (Collins, 2001; Fuad et al., 2025). This process brought together many local communities (Kanayatn, Iban, Park, Kayan, Ot Danum, etc.). Similarly, Chinese identity here has developed through a complex, multi-layered process. Social relations are dynamic and changing, reflecting how ethnic groups continually reconstruct and maintain their identities through social and linguistic practices. In this context, language, particularly the term kinship, plays an important role as a means of articulating social meaning and collective identity.

In the context of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, the term kinship is very important because the people in this region form a complex multi-ethnic social structure. The region is known for its multi-ethnic population and uses ethnic identity as a means of social interaction (King, 1993, 2025). At first glance, ethnic groups in West Kalimantan can be categorized into three main tribes: Malays, Dayaks, and Chinese (Dewantara et al., 2024; Yusriadi et al., 2023). Malay communities, which are the focus of this paper, appear to be literally homogeneous but actually heterogeneous in dialects, local social cultures, and genealogy (Davidson, 2009; Purba et al., 2011). The group known as the Dayak is an even more complex group (King, 2025), comprising dozens of sub-tribes (e.g. Kanayatn, Jangkang, Menterap, Iban, Ketungau, Taman) (Aloy et al., 2008; King, 2025; Maunati, 2011; Shin, 2008). Meanwhile, the Chinese in West Kalimantan are often seen as a unit for people who have Chinese origins, even though in fact, at least, they consist of two groups, namely the Hakka and Hoklo (Atmaja et al., 2023; Ruslan et al., 2025; Suryadinata, 2010).

Although previous studies of ethnic identity in Borneo have provided invaluable insights into

the political dynamics and macro-social situation in the region, most have not touched on the ethnolinguistic side, particularly micro-social aspects such as the use of kinship terms. The varied kinship terms of various Malay variants in West Kalimantan are poorly studied. This study, starting from these gaps, acknowledges the fact of internal heterogeneity of ethnic groups and complex social relations. A very recent study by Dilah et al. (2024) directly addresses this gap. In their examination of the Malay community in Telok Melano (Sarawak), which is culturally linked to the Malay Sambas community in West Kalimantan, they explicitly note that there is “limited scholarly attention to family addressing systems in this geographical context.” The present article fills the gap identified by Dilah et al. with a special focus on the Malay community in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, with the aim of providing an in-depth analysis that is localized on the Indonesian side of the border. The study of kinship in the micro layer is very important for the Malays of West Kalimantan because of the internal and external dynamics of the community. Ahyat (2014) said that the Malays of West Kalimantan can be categorized as “migrant Malays” and “native Malays,” while those who are native are often actually born out of kinship through intermarriage with the Dayak group. In addition, this study was also conducted in response to Collins’s (2001) call for complex and dynamic social relations in West Kalimantan, which challenged the nomenclature of colonial science. A focus on kinship terminology serves as an ideal methodological tool to uncover and document this fluidity, moving beyond rigid colonial labels to reveal how people actually relate to one another.

Theoretically, this article uses SIT theory to explain social dynamics within multi-ethnic societies, whilst demonstrating that the theory can be operationalised within dynamic multi-ethnic societies. At both the literal and symbolic levels, kinship terms serve as a source of identity and a communication strategy for forming social categories, identifying ethnic affiliations, and constructing a shared multi-ethnic identity. This article broadens the scope and relevance of SIT for ethnolinguistic and kinship studies in other regions.

Specifically, the objectives of this study are: (1) to examine how the term Malay kinship functions in the processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison in West

Kalimantan, and (2) to explore how these practices inform the broader kinship framework and Social Identity Theory. By answering these questions, this study highlights how kinship terminology actively shapes group membership and collective identity in pluralistic societies.

II. METHODS

The Research Design

This field study adopts a linguistic ethnographic approach. By combining the terms “linguistic” and “ethnography,” this perspective aligns with an epistemological view of language that is inherently embedded in social contexts. Rampton et al., (2004) note, “Linguistic ethnography generally holds that language and social life are mutually exclusive, and that a careful analysis of the use of placed language can provide fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activities.” This framework has similarities with contemporary sociolinguistics in its concern with the interaction between language and society. This approach is particularly suited to current inquiry because “kinship” within the Malay community serves not only as a linguistic category but as a symbol of identity. Linguistic ethnography allows for context-sensitive exploration of how the kinship term is used in everyday life.

This study uses qualitative methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This methodological approach prioritizes depth over breadth, focusing on the meanings, interpretations, and social practices constructed by individuals in their specific cultural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009). This qualitative approach is suitable for exploring the kinship term and looking at it from the perspective of social structure, power relations, and identity negotiations. As Flick (2018) emphasizes, qualitative research excels at capturing the “subjective perspectives” and “everyday knowledge” of social actors. Thus, it can help understand and utilize their kinship system as a symbol of identity.

As Creswell (2009) notes, “qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand.” The purpose of interpretative research is to understand the social world from the perspective of its own participants

(Weber, 1978). Its function, as a basic philosophy in qualitative inquiry to see reality through language and intersubjective understanding (Schwandt, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From this point of view, kinship must be understood in terms of terms and understanding of society itself.

Source of Data and Participants

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, while secondary data were obtained from written materials. The primary data collection was carried out by the researchers by taking samples in all regions in West Kalimantan (Map 1) representing Malay subgroups and geographical distribution, involving 33 informants. The informants are adults between the ages of 20 and 65 years, and represent various levels of basic education to college, as well as occupations (farmers and state officials).

All participants self-identified as Malay and were selected as accessible community representatives. During the interviews, basic background information was also collected to enrich the contextual analysis. This has been made easier by the fact that the researchers have undertaken extensive academic work and are familiar with the Malay community in West Kalimantan. Their understanding of local terminology, the social context and ethnic communities, as well as language usage, has facilitated this work.

As this study aims to identify geographical variations in kinship terminology, selecting one participant per region was considered sufficient to capture the linguistic and ethnographic norms of Malay kinship terms. These informants served as key informants in this study. The term “key informant” is commonly used in anthropological studies to designate individuals with extensive ethnographic knowledge of their own social and cultural patterns. The inclusion of key informants is crucial in qualitative research, as it can provide implicit and nuanced information that may not be available in secondary sources. Key informants also offer a broader perspective and provide a comparative understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Asfar et al., 2026; Pahwa et al., 2023).

Regarding non-Malay informants, one person from the Dayak Kanayatn ethnic group was interviewed. The Kanayatn Dayak are part of the Malayic branch, a Dayak group that has

a linguistic kinship with the Malay language (for more information on the Malay branch, see Chong, 2024; Smith, 2023; Sommerlot, 2020). These served as key informants, which providing a different perspective to understand the interactions between Malay and non-Malay groups within the framework of ‘social comparison’ analysis.

To complement the synchronic data obtained from interviews and observation, a diachronic and normative perspective was added through the analysis of written documents. These included traditional texts, local folklores, customary documents containing kinship terminology, academic writings, and other relevant materials.

Data Collection

The data were collected in Malay settlement areas stretching from coastal to inland regions. These sites include Pontianak, Mempawah, Sambas, Ketapang, Kayong, Laur, Sanggau, Ngabang, Sekadau, Sintang, Pinoh, Embau, Boyan, and some other places (Figure 2). In terms of data collection, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Indonesian, which serves as the lingua franca of West Kalimantan. Several interview sessions were recorded with the participants’ consent, and relevant sections were selected from the recordings for analysis based on the research objectives.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and organised, grouped according to form and the social context of their use. These statement fragments and groups became the units of analysis. Subsequently, the data was manually coded by the researchers using thematic coding aligned with the form, context of use and meaning attributed to it. For example, entries were recorded, their variations noted, and explanations provided, particularly regarding why and how specific entries were used and interpreted.

This thematic coding refers to Tajfel’s three categories (social categorization, social identification, social comparison). Coding and analysis followed the stages of SIT, and thematic analysis identified patterns of use of kinship terms in the context of social identity formation. Data coding was carried out with reference to the social meaning of the quotations obtained. An expression was grouped into a social category when it referred to kinship terms based on region or ethnic background. Expressions were grouped into social identification based on ownership or identity affiliation. Expressions were grouped under social comparisons based on the informant’s emphasis that the kinship highlights differences or relations with other groups. For example,

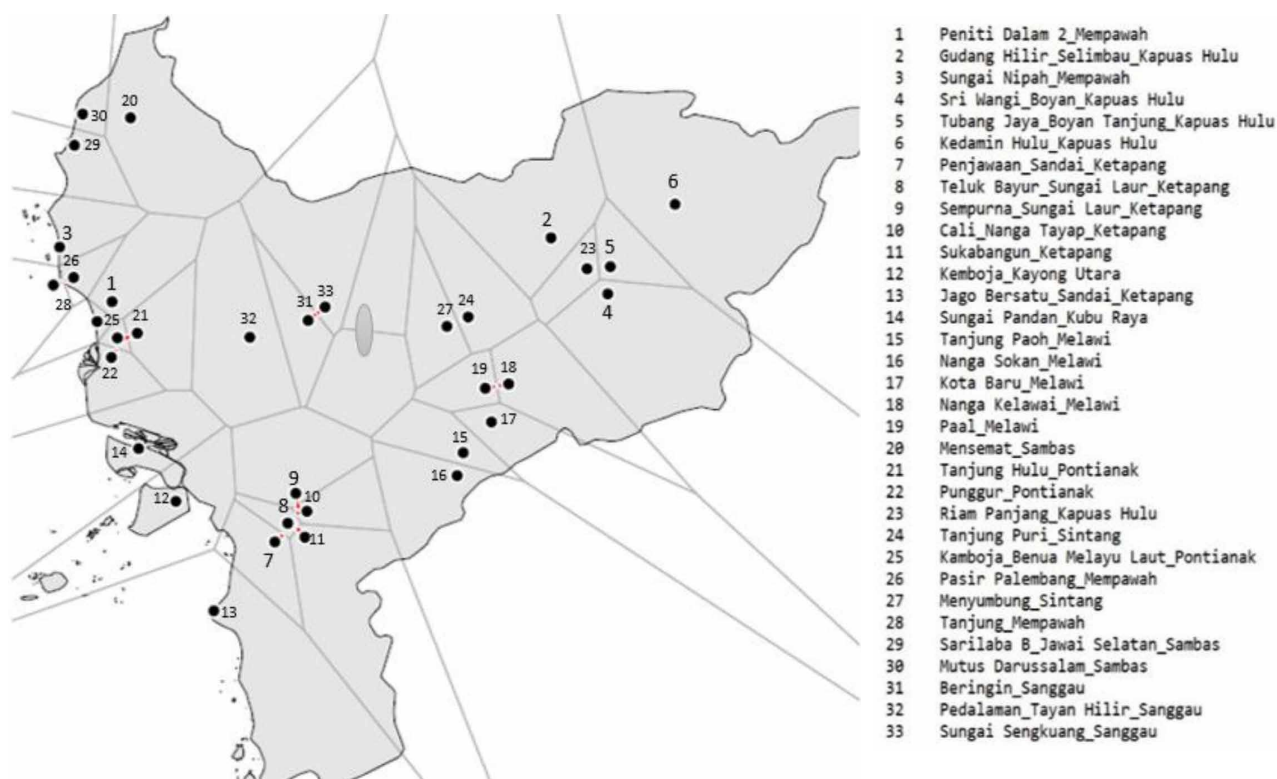


Figure 2: Data collection location

an informant explained that a specific form of kinship was once used in relation to Malay and non-Malay groups; the response was coded as social identification, due to its emphasis on group membership. The researchers coded the data collaboratively and discussed discrepancies to improve reliability. Given that the researchers are already well acquainted with Malay kinship terms and culture in West Kalimantan, reflexivity is treated as an integral part of the analytical process. This cultural and academic familiarity has been of great assistance to the researchers in making more informed interpretations.

To ensure validity, the study used triangulation of sources and methods (comparing interview data with documentation) and examination of members,

asking informants to verify interview data and initial interpretation. Potential research bias was addressed by reviewing the interview data, comparing it with data from other locations, and discussed among the researchers throughout the analysis process. The researchers also consulted an expert on the Malay people of West Kalimantan (Prof. Dr. Hermansyah) to verify the validity of the field data and the preliminary conclusions.

III. RESULTS

The Malay Kinship Terms in West Kalimantan

Kinship terms in the Malay communities of West Kalimantan exhibit a degree of variation. This variation relates to both phonological and lexical forms across various geographical regions,

Table 1. The Malay kinship term in West Kalimantan

Entry	Variations	Explanation
Father	[bapaʔ], [apaʔ], [apoʔ], [apaŋ]	[apaʔ] used to be on the beach and in the interior; [apoʔ] is used in the interior (Kapuas Hulu, Melawi, Sekadau, Sanggau); [apaŋ] is specifically used in the interior of Kapuas Hulu–Melawi.
	[bapaʔ]	Used among educated, formal families and is associated with general Indonesian culture. It is symbolic of a respected man.
	[abah]	Used in Ketapang; it is associated with religious/Arabic connotations.
	[ayah]	[ayah] is used in urban areas (Pontianak, Sambas, Mempawah); and is often perceived as an exotic, referring to Malay.
	[ama]	Used in the interior (Kapuas Hulu, Melawi); it is considered an old/traditional and form.
Mother	[uwaʔ]	Used by the descendants of the Bugis on the coast (Mempawah); it is a loanword in the Bugis community.
	[əmaʔ], [umaʔ], [umoʔ], [mamaʔ]	[əmaʔ] dominant on the coast (Pontianak, Mempawah, North Kayong); [umaʔ/umoʔ] is widespread in the interior (Kapuas Hulu, Ketapang, Melawi, Sambas, Sanggau, Sekadau); [mamaʔ] is used by educated urban families (Sintang, Mempawah, Ketapang).
	[inay]	Old variations in Kapuas Hulu (Buyan, Riam Panjang); considered the original form before switching to [umaʔ].
Grandmother	[ibu]	A symbolic form for an old and respected woman's greeting.
	[neneʔ], [ineʔ], [iniʔ], [neʔ wan], [wan]	Common form in many regions; [wan] is also used in families of Arab descent as an honorific title.
	[nai]	Used by Malay aristocratic families; has a different meaning from [nai] in Javanese culture.
Grandfather	[datoʔ], [atoʔ]	Generally used in coastal and inland areas; consistent with the classical Malay tradition.
	[kayi], [ayi], [ae]	Many are in the interior; reflects the influence of the Malay Dayak and Ibanik.
	[neʔ aki]	Commonly used in Sambas; a form of respect, often abbreviated to simply [aki].
Brother	[abaŋ], [abakŋ], [aba], [abo]	“brother” is used in almost all regions; [aba]/[abo] is dominant on the coast (Mempawah, Sambas); [abakŋ] is spoken in the interior (Kapuas Hulu, Melawi).
	[loŋ]	Used in the interior (Kapuas Hulu, Melawi); It is also used as a salutation for community leaders/elders.
Sister	[kakaʔ], [akaʔ]	Common form in all regions; Marking the older sister.
	[kaʔ loŋ]	Variations with honorary markers; widely used in social interactions.
	[uwa], [wa]	Common in coastal areas; show the influence of Bugis.
	[mboʔ], [inaʔ]	Local variations in some areas of the inland Malay community.
Younger	[adiʔ], [adeʔ], [uju], [usu], [su]	Common variations; inconsistent gender differentiation; Widely used in inland and coastal areas. Symbolic forms for small children in the family, and husbands' greetings to wives in certain situations.
	[buŋsu]	Especially to mark the last child.

including both coastal and inland areas. A summary of these variations is provided in Table 1. This table shows common forms as well as some more specific forms found in particular regions.

Vertical Kinship

The term kinship among the Malays in West Kalimantan to indicate intergenerational relationships (grandparents, ancestors, descendants) varies greatly. For example, the term for “father” shows diversity in forms such as [bapaʔ], [apaʔ], and [apoʔ], in addition to variants such as [ama], [apan], [abah], and [uwaʔ] or [waʔ]. The form [uwaʔ] or [waʔ] by the informant is referred to as a greeting system in the Malay language of Bugis descent. These variants are not distributed randomly but correlate with specific regions. Some terms such as [bapaʔ] and [uwaʔ] appear mainly in the Pontianak and Sambas areas, while others such as [apaʔ], [ama].

Term [apan] is the literal form of a kinship term found in the field, used by male elders. The form [apan] or sometimes [pan] was once used in the inland communities of the Kapuas River. Informants reported that this form was used by the older generation, namely their fathers, who called their male elders (the informants’ grandfathers) [apan] (DD, personal communication, August 10, 2025). In addition, this term is also found in Malay folklore in Riam Panjang. In the story entitled “Apang Sekumang and Rombongannya Ngelangai” (Nurhasanah, 2015, pp. 49–50), or “Kesah Pang Alui” (Syahrani et al., 2024), the term is also used for the main character. On a broader scale, in West Kalimantan society, there are even two regional heroes named Pang, namely (A)pang Suma and Pang Semangai (Alcorn & Royo, 2000; Prabowo, 2019).

Among certain educated, modern, and more religiously observant Malays, the kinship terms [abi] and [papa] are now used to refer to one’s father. An informant in Pontianak remarked jokingly that the choice of term reflects one’s social standing.

“In the past, some people said, if you walk you are called [father], if you take an oplet (a type of city transportation for the small public) you are called [father], if you take a car you are called [papa],” (RB, personal communication, December 14, 2025).

In contrast, the more modern form of [bapaʔ]

or [papa] is more commonly used by non-Malay families as well, while [ayah] is hardly used by this circle.

For “mother”, the common term [əmaʔ] is used extensively in coastal areas (e.g., Pontianak, Mempawah, Kubu Raya), while variants of [umaʔ] (with the replacement e ~ u) appear in inland communities (e.g., Sintang, Kapuas Hulu, Ketapang, Melawi, Sambas, Bengkayang, Sanggau, Sekadau). Other forms include [umaʔ] with the [o] sound ([umoʔ]), [mamaʔ], and [inay], each found regionally. For example, [mamaʔ] (similar to Indonesian [mama]) is reported mainly in the cities of Sintang and Ketapang. Informants from Kapuas Hulu note [inay] as an old form used by earlier generations, largely replaced by the word [umaʔ] among younger speakers.

The term kinship for children uniformly appears in the form meaning “child”. But there are variations to show the order of a child in a family, covering the oldest, middle, and youngest, as well as the male and female genders. This will be discussed in the vertical and horizontal kinship section].

The term for “grandfather” has several forms: [kakeʔ], [datoʔ], [atoʔ], [ayi] (with variants [kayi] and [ae]), and [neʔ aki]. It has different regional distributions: [datoʔ] / [atoʔ] are prevalent in the Pontianak-Ketapang area; [toʔ] occurs in Sambas; and [kayi], [ayi], [ae] appear in the interior. The forms [neʔ] in [neʔ aki] and [neʔ wan] act as markers of decency in some communities. In Sintang (as well as some places in Malaysia), [wan] is used for surnames that go hand in hand with Arab ancestry. Almost the same as in Kapuas Hulu. Only, in Pontianak and Kapuas Hulu, [wan] is only used for calls that show respect for adult men, and are not attached as a personal name.

An interesting term here is [nai], which, although common in Javanese culture (often for aristocratic women), is also used among the Malay nobility to denote a respectable high-status woman. In West Kalimantan Malay, the term [nai] refers specifically to a Malay noble mother and does not carry the negative connotations associated with its counterpart in Javanese. Thus, [nai] in this context reflects the identity of the local aristocrat, different from the use of Javanese (Sulistyowati, 2008). In addition, it was also found that the Javanese term [rama] for father also only appeared among noble

families, which shows social stratification (Yahya & Azim, 2024).

Terms for “grandmother” include [neneʔ], [ineʔ], [iniʔ], [neʔ wan], and [wan], with [wan] also used for prominent old women. “Cucu” is more uniform, with [cucuʔ] (with [ʔ] glottal stop), [cucoʔ], [ucuʔ], and [ucu], showing differences in vowel or consonant sounds. These forms occur throughout the region, both coastal and inland.

. For example, [kayi] and [ayi] appear in the interior with Malay and Ibanik speaker ties, while [datoʔ]/[atoʔ] are in harmony with classical coastal Malay norms. .

However, unlike the previous generation, the younger generation does not use kinship terms that mark both generation and gender. The form [cucuʔ]/[ucuʔ]) can be used for both males and females.

Horizontal Kinship

Meanwhile, within the horizontal group of relatives, relationships among same-generation kin (including brothers, sisters, cousins, and sisters-in-law) show complex patterns of lexical variation. This variation is related to geography and social dynamics in the Malay society of West Kalimantan. The term “brother” includes forms such as [abaŋ], [abakŋ], [aba], [abo], and [loŋ], while for “brother” forms such as [kakaʔ], [kaʔ loŋ], [uwa], [wa], [inaʔ], or [mboʔ] are used.

The data also show distinctions between older and younger siblings. In “elder brother” ([abaŋ]) and “sister” ([kakaʔ]/[akaʔ]) in some Malay communities appear firm, and even important, forms. For example, the brother in the Malay family in Sambas which is located on the coast, and the Kapuas Hulu which is found in the interior, there are variations of [baŋ loŋ], [baŋ wa], [baŋ ŋah], [baŋ mok], [baŋ teh], [baŋ cik], and so on, or [kak loŋ], [kak wa], [kak ŋah], and so on (Dilah et al., 2024: 85). In contrast to the downward hierarchy, “sister”, with the forms [adiʔ], [adeʔ], and [uju], [usu], [ucu], [su], and [icu] do not explicitly distinguish between genders.

In kinship terminology, this function of greeting is formally called Address Terms (Read, 2018), which is used when greeting someone and reflects an emotional relationship or other characteristics, as opposed to Reference Terms which explicitly indicate a genealogical

relationship. The form [uwa] is often not limited to biological relationships, but is also used to address elders. Moreover, the sound [uwa] is similar to the glide [wa] in the word “ketua” (chief/head). Thus, it is very common for people who serve as leaders of organisations in Pontianak to be addressed and referred to as [wa], or [wə].

Kinship terms in these horizontal groups also reflect local identity and cultural contact. The forms [baŋ loŋ] and [kaʔ loŋ] are more dominant in coastal communities in Mempawah and Sambas, while [abakŋ] (with the homorganic consonants k and ŋ), and [loŋ]/ without [kaʔ] or [baŋ], are typically used in inland Malay communities such as Kapuas Hulu and Melawi.

It is also interesting to observe that the term “sister”, although it has some local forms, does not show consistency in gender differentiation. The form [adeʔ] is used literally without specifically referring to younger brother or sister. Symbolically, [adeʔ] is also worn in some families to call their young children, for boys and girls, as a form of affectionate calling.

In addition, still related to affectionate calls, some sources say that the form [adeʔ] is also used by Malay families to call their wives or partners in a limited and intimate area of use (RB, personal communication, December 9, 2025).

IV. DISCUSSION

This section of the discussion examines findings regarding kinship terms in Malay communities in West Kalimantan, based on the three aspects of SIT (Social Categories, Social Identification and Social Comparison). This suggests that kinship terms serve as a means of classifying social distinctions, identifying affiliations, and situating oneself within social relationships. In other words, kinship terms function literally as linguistic forms and symbolically as a means of social identification.

Social Categorization

Social categorization is the process by which individuals categorize themselves and others based on relevant attributes. In the Malay society of West Kalimantan, one of these attributes is the terminology of kinship. The Malays here use certain kinship terms to refer to kinship, thus signifying Malay cultural identity and affiliation. For example, each Malay informant identified

the term kinship they used as a characteristic of Malay kinship. These terms encode the idea of Malay group ownership and imply shared cultural knowledge.

However, these terms vary across geographies and histories, resulting in internal subcategories. For example, the words [uwa?] are associated with coastal areas influenced by the Bugis language, [aki] and [wan] with the northern coast (Sambas), and [kayi]/[ayi]/[apaŋ]/[apak] with the interior, reflecting Ibanic and Malay influences. These lexical forms indicate internal subgrouping: Bugis, influenced coastal, and Ibanic, influenced inland). Some informants provided additional labels for the vocabulary they supplied: “The Sambas Malays, when referring to a grandfather, will indeed say “aki” or “nek”.’ And, “The Bugis Malays in Mempawah commonly call their father “uwa?”. This is in line with previous findings: variations in kinship terms reflect genealogical relationships and socio-political relationships. In West Kalimantan, differences in terminology create symbolic boundaries between “kita” (Malay) and “other” (non-Malay) (Collins, 2001; Yusriadi et al., 2023). This variation, when viewed from a sociolinguistic perspective, shows the geographical distribution of the vertical kinship term that reflects interethnic contact and mobility.

Social Identification

Social identification occurs when groups internalize their category attributes as part of their identity. In the Malay society of West Kalimantan, the term kinship is one of these attributes. The choice of terms for relatives is not only linguistic but also markers of group affiliation and continuity of social history. All informants labeled the terms they used as Malay characteristics, using them to reveal that they “came from a Malay family.”

Notably, some kinship terms also carry traces information about the community of origin. For example, the inland forms [apaŋ] (father) and [aki] (grandfather) hint at the origins of the Malay and Ibanic Dayaks. The informant said that although they now identify themselves as Malay, the term reflects their ethnolinguistic history. This phenomenon demonstrates a semantic shift from literal kinship to symbolic kinship, where kinship terms become a means of articulating status, affiliation, and collective ethics (Abram & Lien, 2023; Schneider, 2014; Ulashevna, 2025). In this

context, kinship terms function as symbols of integration. The process of “masuk Melayu” or becoming Malay (entering the Malay community) often occurs through Islam and cultural assimilation (Munawar et al., 2025; Nordin et al., 2025; Purba et al., 2011), but linguistic forms may still preserve traces of their history.

In this case, kinship terms serve as a symbol of integration. They maintain ties with old traditions while affirming their Malay identity. As Ulu Malays (interior upriver Malay), by recalling an old form once used they implicitly identify themselves as a distinct lineage compared with other Malays (Pontianak, Sambas, etc.) and, in fact, as the same as the Iban Dayak who use the form [aki]. Thus, if those from Kapuas Hulu can be identified as part of the same group as the Iban (Dayak in the broad sense today), they can be accepted. In fact, some of the people, generally referred to as the Kapuas Ulu Malay, became part of the Islamic Dayak or Dayak Islam (Yusriadi, 2007). (For more on the Islamic Dayak, see Halim et al., 2021; Haridison et al., 2024). When conflicts arose between the Malay and the Dayak, this Islamic Dayak group acted as a liaison. Thus, kinship terminology in West Kalimantan signifies solidarity and continuity of the group. This is consistent with the idea that kinship identity is shaped by social relationships as well as by offspring (Read, 2018; Sagdieva et al., 2019).

Social Comparison

Social comparison is when a group evaluates its identity attributes relatively different or the same as other groups. In the Malay society of West Kalimantan, the term kinship also plays a role here. For example, using [uma?] for “mother” in one area versus [əma?], [mama?], or [inay] in another is more than just geographical, also distinguishing subgroups in Malay society. Families who used [əma?] for “mother” identified as working-class Malays, whereas those who adopted the national standard [ibu] aligned themselves with an educated, urban identity. Similarly, with the word [ayah], one informant revealed that [ayah] is an old Malay form, which is now used again because it is more exotic to describe Malay identity. This is different from the term [bapak], which, although more modern, does not specifically reflect Malay ethnicity. In addition, the form [bapa?] is also symbolically used as a greeting for respected adult

men. This form is widely used under the influence of Indonesian or standard languages (Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022).

When certain kinship terms became widespread beyond Malay speakers, social comparisons resurfaced. A number of Malay families have chosen to use the term [ayah] to distinguish themselves from non-Malays. The choice to differentiate oneself in a multi-ethnic context is a form of effort to maintain differences (Cleveland, 2024). Along with social development, Malay families choose the form [bapak] or [ibu] taken from the national language (Bahasa Indonesia). Uniquely, in West Kalimantan, this national form occurs more often in urban-coastal areas as a modern symbol; and on the other hand, the kinship term is also chosen by non-Malays (Dayak) which makes them look the same as the Malays (KN, personal communication, January 15, 2026).

In many cases, terms that originally referred to direct biological relationships (such as elder brother or younger brother) haven't been expanded to form of greeting that signifies social status or respect in wider social interaction.

In short, through the term kinship, the Malays of West Kalimantan distinguish "we" from "them" based on region, status, and social strategy. These terms become flexible tools in maintaining similarities and differences that accommodate the choice or defense of identity for social interests. This situation shows that what is happening to the Malay community in West Kalimantan can be understood by mirroring what is happening elsewhere (Abram & Lien, 2023; Milanova et al., 2024; Mitchell & Evans, 2025).

Overall, the variety and flexibility of terms in the horizontal kinship category reinforces the finding that kinship language in West Kalimantan is a dynamic social practice. This form serves not only as a genealogical reference system, but also as a tool for reorganizing social relations and building solidarity across biological boundaries. This phenomenon shows that the horizontal kinship terminology system in Malay society plays an active role in shaping and negotiating social identities in the midst of a diverse ethnic landscape. In fact, these terms implicitly describe a complex Malay kinship and family system, which thus will not find a rigid and intact form as the "native Malay".

The findings of this study indicate that

Malay kinship terminology in West Kalimantan relates to both literal and symbolic dimensions. Literally, kinship terms regulate genealogical relationships and define family positions within an established lineage structure (Schneider, 2014). Symbolically, the same terms are used to negotiate social relationships outside the family, functioning as markers of respect, hierarchy, solidarity, and a sense of collective belonging. The presence of these two dimensions allows kinship terminology to function as an indicator of genealogical relationships, but also as a dynamic social practice through which group identity is constructed and utilised. In contrast to other places as described in Gusnawaty et al. (2022), Click et al. (2025), Mitchell & Evans (2025), Schneider (2014) or Wallace & Atkins (1960), among the Malay people in West Kalimantan, it is more complex, and forms based on biological circles play a central role in mediating interactions across ethnic, regional, and social boundaries. Here, the term kinship connects everyday linguistic choices with broader processes of social identity formation, which are clearly very fluid.

These findings suggest a broader research direction: examining the relationship between ethnic identities in Borneo through the lens of kinship terminology. Such a study would usefully complement existing research on Dayak ethnic identity in West Kalimantan. This field is certainly broad and open, as King (2025, p. 1) says: "One of the enduring preoccupations and issues of debate in the sociological-anthropological literature on Southeast Asia in general and Borneo in particular has been the problem of conceptualising ethnicity and ethnic categories, and then attempting to identify, delimit and name ethnic groupings in regard to socio-cultural interaction, boundary-making and group formation". This shows that the term Malay kinship is a negotiated symbolic entity in the multi-ethnic society of West Kalimantan.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Malay kinship terminology system in West Kalimantan is a social practice that encompasses both literal and symbolic dimensions. Based on the framework of Social Identity Theory, these findings confirm that the term kinship functions through three mechanisms of SIT social identity formation: social categorization, social identification, and

social comparison. Social categorization are formed through the differentiation of terms based on location, history, and ethnicity. Forms such as [uwaʔ], [aki], [apaŋ], [əmaʔ], and [umaʔ] indicate differences between sub-groups within the wider Malay population. Social identification is evident in the internalization of these terms as a symbol of group membership and solidarity (even among non-Malays becoming Malays). Social comparison occurs when community maintain or adapt the term kinship to differentiate themselves from others, especially under the influence of urbanization and national language. The forms of the words [ayah], [bapaʔ] and [ibu] in urban and multi-ethnic settings provide a striking example of this contrast.

These findings confirm that the kinship term is related to biological bonds and is a tool for displaying identity. Associated with the concept that identity is fluid, the kinship term is symbolically flexible. The Malay kinship system in West Kalimantan shows a diverse variety and accommodating meaning, reproducing new social meanings in multiethnic relationships.

This study contributes to ethnolinguistic research, in which language in multiethnic societies can serve as a tool for pragmatic “identity negotiation”. Therefore the emergence of the term non-local kinship should be seen as a mechanism of social cohesion rather than an anomaly. Future research may examine how the frequency of use of traditional versus national kinship terms correlates with changes in social and mobility in pluralistic societies. We acknowledge that this study has its limitations, including the following: whilst the study has covered the entire region of West Kalimantan, it has not fully captured all aspects of its geographical and social diversity. The number of informants and the qualitative nature of the research are context-specific, and do not statistically generalise to

all Malay communities. Consequently, the in-depth analysis of these communities does not yet constitute a model for something that is universal and comprehensive.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Ushuluddin dan Adab, Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Pontianak Research Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities have been kept strictly anonymous to ensure confidentiality. The research fully complies with the ethical standards and publication guidelines of Jurnal Arbitrer.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Yusriadi Yusriadi is conducted the research, collecting data, and drafted the manuscript.

Chong Shin is formulating conceptualisation and verified the final draft of the data.

Dedy Ari Asfar, collecting data, is finalized the manuscript in a decent text

Bob Andrian, collecting data, is finalized the manuscript in a decent text.

Muhammad Lutfi Hakim, is verified the final draft of the data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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