THE MAH MERI LANGUAGE
AN INTRODUCTION

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AN INTRODUCTION

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Jariah Mohd Jan

Introduction
As any other natural language, the Mah Meri language has an inventory of terms to denote relations between kinsmen. Being able to understand the usage of such terms means that one is mindful of one’s station in the community. The use of appropriate terms of address helps to establish cordial relations while fostering warmth between interlocutors. This chapter presents a sociolinguistic description of the terms of kinship in Mah Meri. These are not only terms of reference but are also used in addressing individuals in face-to-face interaction.

As the Mah Meri society is also structured according to “ranks” conferred on individuals as leaders of the community, this chapter also discusses this sub-category. As the case is with kinship terms, the terms designating these ranks also connote respect in their usage.

Kinship Terms
In Mah Meri community, using suitable kinship terms in addressing one another is vital in establishing social relations between individuals. A kinship terminology is defined as a word used by socially recognised relatives in addressing or speaking of each other. The use of kinship terms is, however, only one of several ways in which relatives can address and refer to each other. Oyetade (1995) refers to kinship terms as words or expressions used in interactive, dyadic and face-to-face situations to designate the person being talked to. It constitutes an important part of verbal behaviour through which the behaviour, norms and practices of a society can be identified. (Afful, 2006).
The Mah Meri people are well aware of the existence of blood relatives and what this constitutes. Such a relationship represents a very close bond which the most basic type is between parents and children. It also encompasses the relationship between husband and wife, brothers and sisters, father, mother of ego’s parents, and so on. Kinship terms are also used in relationships between persons who are not socially recognised relatives.

According to Wardhaugh (2002: 217), if we look at what is in addressing another, it seems that a variety of social factors usually our choice of terms such as the social status, sex, age, family relations, occupational hierarchy, transactional status, race, or degree of i
attitudes, and feelings of the speaker and addressee as well as the formality of the communication context. Hence, a person can be addressed in many ways according to different contexts.

In the Mah Meri community, kinship terms take into consideration factors such as age and status of a person in the family. Such terms of address are quite similar to that of the Malay society even though there are also some differences. Whatever ties that exist, either blood or marital ties, it is evident that references remain the same and any adjustment is not required if a person were to step outside the border of his own family.

Similar to the Malay culture, Mah Meri family perception is fluid and open. One can be considered as a close relative through marriage and even through a close relationship without any blood ties. Once a marriage takes place, both families from the groom and bride are considered to become close relatives.

Kinship structure is the basis of the Mah Meri community, which grows bigger with strong social interdependence and high respect of familial values, customs and mores. The kinship terms for the Mah Meri community, which extend over such vertical lines, are mainly due to memory crystallised in oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. Figure 1 shows the terms denoting kinship used within the community along the horizontal and vertical axes.

The Mah Meri extended family consisting of grandparents, parents and children living together under one roof has traditionally been the centre of activity. Like the Malays, they practice a ranking system by seniority where it is expected that a younger person pay more respect towards the elders. This aspect of behaviour is reflected in the use of kinship terms. For instance, the kinship term for the male and female great-grandparents is /gampah/. This is the term of respect used for the oldest generation. The terms for the generation coming after the oldest ones, refer to the grandfather and grandmother. Ego's grandfather from either of ego's parents is called /nini/ (grandfather), while the grandmother is /gandai/. The next generation is the father and mother. The terms used are /apa/ (father) and /gandek/ (mother) respectively. (see Table 14.1).

The Mah Meri community also has its own terms of address amongst siblings to refer to one's older or younger siblings of either gender. They use the term /je/ (brother) for an elder male relative, or any other male who though not

Table 14.1: Kinship Terms in the Vertical Axis

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i)</td>
<td>/gampah/</td>
<td>great grandparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii)</td>
<td>/nini/</td>
<td>grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii)</td>
<td>/gandai/</td>
<td>grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv)</td>
<td>/apa/</td>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(v)</td>
<td>/gandek/</td>
<td>mother</td>
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This book is a holistic description of the Mah Meri language from phonology to syntax, extending to discourse and the lexis. As the title shows, it is meant to introduce to researchers in linguistics and related disciplines not only the basic systems and structures, but also the culture and belief system that goes with language.