

Community efforts in developing and financing an MLE project: The Kelabit Language of Sarawak

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Abstract

This paper attempts to portray the struggles the Kelabit community faces in seeking to revitalise, document and develop the fast disappearing Kelabit language, spoken by 5000-6000 people in Sarawak, Malaysia. Topics to be covered include the action plans currently undertaken to achieve language revitalization goals. These include the use of ICT as a promotion tool, a dictionary-making project, and the mobilisation of the elderly to teach and promote the language through traditional arts, crafts, songs and music. An important aspect of this effort is the establishment of an agricultural project by the Community Association (Rurum Kelabit Sarawak-RKS) to raise funds for a new language school. In essence, this presentation aims to share the Kelabit experiences and struggles, particularly with financing, with the hope of creating greater awareness and stimulating discussion to generate creative ideas, thus building upon each other's experiences and knowledge.

Background: Who are the Kelabit?

The Kelabit are one of Malaysia's smallest ethnic minority groups comprising about 6,000 people. Our traditional homeland is the remote and inaccessible Kelabit Highlands with Bario as the community hub. Bario is famous for the production of the uniquely fine-grained organic **Bario Rice**, the organic **Bario Highland Salt** taken from its natural salt springs and the extremely honey-sweet, luscious organic Bario pineapples. It is also the home of the multi-international award winning **e-Bario** project that introduced computers, telephones and the internet to this hitherto isolated community.

The introduction of both Christianity and education to this small community in the early 1940's has brought tremendous changes in our outlook towards life and has brought radical development to our community. As a people the Kelabit are very open to new ideas. We have often been referred to as a "highly distinctive and resourceful community" (Harris, R., 2008). The community has readily embraced the educational opportunities that were opened to us such that today, the percentage of educated individuals and professionals in the community is among the highest in Malaysia. While this is a positive development, it has its setbacks in terms of preservation of our language and culture.

II. Declining Usage of the Kelabit Language

With the emphasis on educational achievements, the Kelabit began to master first, English, then Malay as the national language. In order to progress within the system and to make it easier on our children to cope with school, many families began to use

the language of education as a means of communication at home and in the process, began to ignore our own mother tongue. Our forced migration to the cities in search of paid employment has aggravated matters further. Many Kelabit have also inter-married with non-Kelabit, so that there has been less and less need to speak Kelabit at home and little incentive to learn and speak the language. Today, it is estimated that less than 1,500 people speak Kelabit fluently, and they comprise mostly the older generation. That generation is rapidly disappearing. When graded on the Fishman's scale, the Kelabit language falls under stage 7.

III. Revitalisation of the Language

Given this state of affairs, **Rurum Kelabit Sarawak** (the Kelabit Cultural Association) is calling for urgent coordinated efforts to revitalise the language before it becomes moribund or disappears completely. We have much to learn from other communities and nations, but have started some initiatives which are described briefly in this paper.

1. Kelabit Play School Projects – *Tawaq Raut*

Taking the cue from the Bidayuh of Sarawak and with the encouragement, assistance and training provided by SIL Sabah, two play schools (*Tawaq Raut*) have been initiated in two different villages in Bario with attendance of between 6-12 children each. Students are taught Kelabit through play, toys, pictures, story-telling, reading, singing etc. A group of eight women have volunteered to go for training and are taking turns to teach the classes.

2. Dictionary Project

Work on a dictionary began in 1977, but was stalled for a long time. Finally, **David Lian Labang** has taken up the task again. Lian has undergone two short-term training sessions in Sabah for Lexicography and subsequently, attended a 6 month course in Linguistics at High Wycombe, England. To date, he has managed to do a collection of 2,000 root words.

3. Using ICT in Language Development

With almost all the young people being connected through the internet, efforts are being made to raise awareness of the endangerment of the Kelabit language through the use of ICT. This is where the e-Bario project has played a major role in promoting and preserving Kelabit language and culture. Thanks to e-Bario, Lian can work in Bario, far out in the interior, collecting, refining and documenting data for the Kelabit dictionary project and still be in contact with the rest of the Kelabit people throughout the world through a website we call OKC (**Online Kelabit Community**). Together, the Kelabit everywhere can make a contribution by helping to develop, increase and comment on the word list. Lian has also developed another website he calls “**wiki Kelabit**” specifically for dictionary development.

There is a drive among urban Kelabit to communicate through the email using Kelabit language as a means of testing out the acceptable orthography. It is also an effective means of information sharing, of “bonding”, and keeping strong kinship ties.

4. Documenting Oral Literature

For generations, knowledge had traditionally been passed down orally from one generation to the next. It was only in 1946 that the first school was started in the Kelabit Highlands and the young began to receive formal education. Since then, massive life-changing developments have occurred affecting the whole community. There has been an exodus of the younger generation to the cities, and they were soon followed by their aging parents who could no longer look after themselves. Changes have occurred so fast that the Kelabit people have almost been “overtaken” unawares. Thus, we have failed to ensure that our traditional knowledge, including our history, our genealogy, the arts and our numerous life-skills were preserved or documented. Sadly the numbers of people remaining who can remember stories of the past or re-enact these skills are rapidly dwindling.

Some effort has been put into gather existing stories and knowledge through the use of digital recorders. This has been impeded by the shortage of resources, both in terms of manpower as well as funding.

5. Picture Documentation

It has often been said that one picture speaks a thousand words. One single picture is able to draw out numerous memories, diverse stories and view points from various sources. Efforts are now underway to gather old pictures, and records of historical events, pictures that portray the relationships, celebrations, and stories of the community. We are also currently experimenting on the use of a web page to collect, invite comments and to document the same.

6. Language Promotion Through Cultural Activities

The death of a language inevitably means the loss of a people’s culture, and very often, the introduction of a new belief system also inadvertently aids the death of a culture. For the Kelabit, the introduction of Christianity has diminished much of the traditional cultural practices primarily because of initial confusion between Christianity and ‘western’ culture. At one point the Kelabit had abandoned almost everything Kelabit in favour of western culture which was thought to be equivalent to ‘Christian’ culture. Today, we are able to differentiate these issues, and have found our own Kelabit brand of Christianity which fits our cultural situation. But in the meantime, much has been lost.

Lian has taken up the role of traditional dance trainer among the young children. In the process, he inculcates the use of Kelabit language in his descriptions and instructions. Traditional music and songs in Kelabit are also being taught in schools in the Kelabit Highlands through co-curricular activities. Hopefully, this will help not only to revive interest in culture, but also promote the use of Kelabit in everyday communication.

7. Language Promotion through Religious Activities

When the Kelabit embraced Christianity, we did so wholeheartedly, and as a whole tribe. A spiritual revival swept through the highlands beginning in October 1973, and has impacted the personal lives of many individual Kelabit

immensely, making our belief come alive. That revival has had a deep influence on our total outlook on life today. The worship meetings are normally conducted in the Kelabit language, but unfortunately, we have yet to translate the Bible into our own language.

The Kelabit are a musically inclined people. We play a wide range of musical instruments including the *sapeq*, *ruding*, *suling*, *selengut*, *pagang*, *serudinq*, *serunai* and *the tawak*. We also enjoy singing. We compose our own songs, ballads, and hymns. Many worship songs have been translated into Kelabit, giving us the opportunity to express ourselves in Kelabit, thereby making our songs more personal and meaningful. With the declining use of the language, it is getting to be a rare phenomenon.

8. Language Promotion through Ceremonies and Festivals

The cultural festivals celebrated by the Kelabit include Name Changing Ceremonies and Harvest Thanksgiving Festivals, all conducted in Kelabit. Those festivals are still very much celebrated in the highlands as family and community affairs. For the population that is in the urban centres, avenues are consistently being created for the Kelabit to congregate, to meet, to share our experiences and to rekindle kinship ties. These include the annual **Education Excellence Award Ceremony**, the **Kelabit Highlanders Sports and Games Festival** and the **Bario Highlands Food Festival** that is becoming an established feature in the highlands. These have proved to be excellent opportunities for cultural preservation as well as for promoting language revitalisation. At the food festival, food items and their preparation can only be described in Kelabit.

9. Language Promotion through Tourism

The Kelabit Highlands is developing into a popular tourist destination particularly for nature lovers, jungle trekkers and wildlife enthusiasts. To cater to our needs, a Kelabit-English phrase book has been compiled for ease of communication.

Naturally, in providing hospitality to tourists, the homestay owners promote many aspects of our cultural heritage as well. In addition, the Bario Nature Guides have been trained in the specialised knowledge of the environment, the flora and fauna of the Kelabit Highlands using Kelabit terminology. This is a definite asset towards preserving the Kelabit language and traditional knowledge.

IV. Challenges and Needs

1. Lack of awareness and local expertise

Probably the biggest challenge we face in revitalising the Kelabit language is the lack of awareness and expertise among the Kelabit people themselves. There is little sense of urgency in promoting and revitalising the language and there are hardly any Kelabit linguists in the field of

lexicography and orthography. We have yet to develop a fully accepted written orthography in Kelabit.

2. Teacher Training and Production of Resource Material

There is adequate interest among Kelabit speakers to teach Kelabit pre-schoolers, but more specialised training is needed for them. None of those we have trained so far had had any formal training in the mother tongue. More Writers' Workshops to develop instructional and reading materials in Kelabit are urgently needed.

3. Depleting Resource Persons

This is a worrying factor as obviously, the older generation of resource persons for story-telling, re-enactment of tales, and speaking of pure Kelabit language are rapidly declining in number. In fact, some cultural skills training in many aspects have completely disappeared, for example, blacksmithing, pottery-making, making of musical instruments, to name a few.

4. Shortage of Funding and Sustainability

To sustain any language project, it is imperative that funding must be available. Digital recording and documenting of information requires the acquisition of expensive equipment, travelling allowances etc. The training and support of teachers and writers also require funding. As a result of the very minimal allowance paid to teachers, they keep leaving for better paid jobs elsewhere.

V. Future Projects:

1. Fund Raising Efforts:

We are concerned that hitherto, we have been dependent on outside help and goodwill to finance our education projects. We believe that for it to be sustainable, the stakeholders must own the project. Thus, the *Tawaq Raut* teachers under the leadership of *Inu Unyang and Jerome Giak* have recently taken the initiative to set up a *White Chilli Farm Project* which is expected to yield some fruits for sale to support the needs of the playschools. In addition, *Rurum Kelabit Sarawak* has been organising fund raising dinners and sports competitions for the furtherance of the Kelabit Education Projects. Meantime, we continue to appeal for goodwill donations from various sources, including from among Kelabit people themselves.

2. Kelabit-in-Camp and Kelabit Mother-tongue Festivals

While the campaign to communicate and speak in Kelabit is underway, we plan to organise special educational camps whereby Kelabit will be taught to students of varying ages. Language and Cultural Festivals or even Seminars with special emphasis on promoting Kelabit culture is hoped to increase awareness, encourage individual participation and enrich our resources in terms of written stories, songs and traditions in Kelabit.

3. Tawaq Raut in Towns

The greatest need for teaching the Kelabit language is in fact to the Kelabit children who have been brought up in the towns and cities, devoid of much of the traditional Kelabit cultural exposure and influences. Once the necessary teaching aids and resources are prepared, our vision is to see more *Tawaq Raut* in the urban areas.

4. Bible Translation in Kelabit

Many people have shared how meaningful the Bible becomes when read in Kelabit. Since the whole Kelabit community is Christian, our next project is to translate the Bible into Kelabit.

VII. Conclusion

The preservation and revitalisation of the Kelabit language is of utmost priority. It is heartening to note the interest that the *Rurum Kelabit Sarawak* (Sarawak Kelabit Society) has taken in the project and the fact that the younger generation like Lian have begun to participate actively. Revitalisation however, cannot happen in a vacuum. It requires a multi-pronged and multi-faceted approach. Beyond the preservation of culture, families must be able to see the benefits of keeping and speaking the language. Since language is tied to a peoples' identity, the importance of preserving the language is vital for the survival of the Kelabit as an ethnic group.



Kelabit children dressed in Kelabit Costume



Mekasur dance at the Community Centre



Traditional Music: Sapeq and Suling Medley



Tawaq Raut Paq Ukat One out of two “Tawaq Raut” in Bario.

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