

# To Promote the Kadazandusun Languages of Sabah

Rita Lasimbang



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## Introduction

The state of Sabah, Malaysia occupies the northeastern part of the island of Borneo. Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia since 1963, was selected on the basis of having the greatest number of speakers. At the time, the Malay people made up more than half of the population of peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah, however, 80% of the population is made up of indigenous ethnic groups. There are 54 indigenous languages in Sabah. Most belong to four major language families: Dusunic, Murutic, Paitanic, Sama Bajau. Thirteen languages are classified as Dusunic. According to the 1999 Sabah census projection, speakers of Kadazan or Dusun ethnicity should have numbered 750,000 in 2000, making Kadazan and Dusun the largest single language community in Sabah. Speakers of the Kadazan and Dusun languages are mainly found along the west coast of Sabah and also some distance inland. The term 'Kadazandusun' is the official name of the shared language used in Sabah schools. More recently, the word has been used as a general umbrella term for both Kadazan and Dusun people and their language.

After Sabah joined Malaya in 1963, emphasis was placed on acquisition of the national language. Parents began to allow the use of Malay at home to ease assimilation into the Malaysian culture. However, the community began to be aware of the possible language loss in the early '80s. A 1988 survey revealed that the community had long wanted their language to be taught in schools but that their desire had never been made public. After many attempts, Kadazandusun language was re-introduced in Sabah schools in 1997. (The Kadazan language was taught in some mission-run primary schools and Native Voluntary Schools (NVS) in Sabah in the mid-1950s until the late 1960s.) In 2001, Kadazandusun was taught to 30,000 children in grades 4 through 6 in 435 primary schools in 23 districts throughout the state.

To support continuous development of the Kadazandusun language, there was a need to set up a language body that

co-ordinates and monitors programmes and activities pertaining to the development of the Kadazandusun language.

Thus, the Kadazandusun Language Foundation (KLF) which is a non-profit organisation was established in 1995 with the objectives of preserving, developing, and promoting the Kadazandusun language as well as other indigenous languages of Sabah.

KLF's four programme areas are: Linguistics and Anthropology, Literacy and Literature, Translation and Community Service, and Training and Development.

Since its establishment, KLF has been particularly concerned with mobilising the Kadazandusun community towards taking increasing responsibility for the development of the language. KLF recognises that community involvement in and acceptance of its work is vital to the survival of the Kadazandusun language. To this end, the following language activities have been conducted by KLF to ensure positive involvement by the community in the directions the Kadazandusun language is taking.

## Language Training

Once it was agreed to go ahead with the teaching of the Kadazandusun language in schools, the Sabah Education Department called upon KLF to provide technical advice and consultancy. KLF first began to provide this service in 1995 to key personnel from the Department in the first national-level meeting to draft the Kadazandusun language curriculum. KLF continues to provide technical consultancy to the Sabah Education Department on a needs basis. KLF has also assisted the University of Malaysia Sabah in the preparation of their Kadazandusun language classes, which they offered as an elective since 1998.



At a writers' group workshop held by KLF

KLF has taught the basic linguistic aspects of their mother tongue to several groups from a variety of backgrounds. Aside from primary school teachers, who needed to understand the linguistic components of the Kadazandusun language before being sufficiently confident to teach the subject in schools, participants have also included journalists, school-aged children, young adults, pre-school teachers and tertiary-level instructors.

These input sessions are often coordinated by the respective Kadazandusun communities themselves; for example, KLF provided input on linguistics in a yearly teacher-training workshop held by Suausindak, a community pre-school for three consecutive years—after which time, the senior teachers were able to carry out the training themselves. Suausindak was the first school in Sabah to offer Kadazandusun language classes to pre-school age children.

### Writers Training Workshops

Training and workshops have been highly useful in mobilising more community involvement in mother tongue preservation. To address the development of literature in the mother tongue, KLF conducts writers' workshops to increase writers' motivation and to provide them with skills in literature production. These include a session on desktop publishing to enable writers and illustrators to utilise the latest equipment in their work. Workshops are also conducted at the village level. Editors' workshops are conducted to add to the skills of the body of local writers. Participants learn to check for such things as whether the story is appropriate for their area, the information is understandable, or the subject matter is appropriate for the audience. It is hoped that these activities will help to ease the backlog of publication, since more members of the community will be confident and be able to assist in the publishing component of literature production.

KLF has also organised a Shell Book Production Workshop to introduce the technique of producing massive numbers

of books in a short time using a template or shell. The Workshop was notable in that the 42 participants not only included Kadazan (Penampang) or Dusun speakers, but represented 7 other different language groups of Sabah: Bajau, Bonggi, Begahak, Kolobuan, Murut-Paluan, Iranun, and Rungus. The Shell Book technique has been useful in the instruction of basic concepts such as health and hygiene for beginning literates.

Workshops for learning material production have also been held for Kadazandusun language teachers. A draft of a workbook was produced for trial teaching one whole year before the final manuscript was written. The output has been the first ever Kadazandusun Language Workbook for pre-school children. A similar seminar and workshop has been held for language teachers at the primary school level, which also produced a workbook.

### Production of Local Literature

KLF serves as an avenue for the publication of vernacular books. In this way, much of Kadazandusun oral tradition could be preserved and bequeathed, and the language could be a living, vibrant language. To date, 35 titles have been published and circulated. KLF continues to tap into local talent for materials written in the mother tongue in many ways. By conducting a yearly writing competition, members of the community have been encouraged to put folktales and short stories down in writing. Since 1997, winning entries in the competition have been compiled into volumes and made available at book fairs and exhibitions.

Many activities are also conducted at the grass-roots level. KLF facilitated a 'story-book production workshop' at village level. Participants, who are local community members, discussed to decide their topic. They also recorded folktales from the village leaders.

Under production at the moment is a Timugon Murut-Malay dictionary. Timugon Murut is one of the Murutic lan-



A preschool workbook

Publication in Kadazandusun languages promotion

guages. The project was initiated by the Summer Institute of Linguistics – Malaysia Branch and handed over to KLF in 1997. The dictionary, containing more than 22,000 entries with an ethnographic sketch, is due to be completed in early 2004.

KLF also shares experiences and expertise with organisations in other parts of Malaysia. Recently, KLF gave technical assistance to the Sa'ban Association Sarawak in publishing books of folktales. Another group from Sarawak, the Bidayuh Language Development Team has also met with KLF to discuss what is involved in starting a language foundation.

### Preserving Oral Tradition

KLF has played an active part in documenting and demonstrating oral arts for posterity. The strong desire to draw out the oral component of culture has been evident in community participation in events such as the *Humius* (traditional Kadazandusun singing) and *Mananong* (traditional Kadazandusun story-telling) conducted by KLF.

For example, a *Humius* event in June 2000 drew as many as 24 participants, most of whom were *Bobohizan* (Kadazandusun priestesses/ritual specialists) and elders in the community. Traditional songs used in ritual chanting and songs traditionally sung at community gatherings were performed. It was truly a celebration of oral tradition as the Kadazandusun community heard it in its original form – the expression of culture found in traditional songs.

A *Mananong* demonstration has been held for teachers and school children, and there have been Kadazandusun story-telling competitions for school children to instill the indigenous art of story-telling. Both events have been videotaped and transcribed. These demonstrations and competitions not only instill the art among the younger generation, but provide materials for new books which can then be used by children. In the future, these folk stories will be translated for non-Kadazandusun speakers—for a wider readership.

On the occasion of the yearly Harvest Festival (a traditional Kadazandusun celebration), district level and village level communities have continued to seek KLF's advice on judging criteria and the suitability of material used in reading and story-telling competitions. KLF is also often invited to head the judging panel.



'Learning Kadazandusun' CD-ROM

### Translation Services

Over the years, KLF has provided translation services to several government agencies for such materials as health brochures, advertisements, press releases, and patriotic songs. There is a growing awareness of the possibility of using the Kadazandusun language to address a wider audience. In health pamphlets among the rural communities in particular, it is especially important to be able to provide instruction in the mother tongue, as there is a great likelihood that clients only have basic literacy acquisition. The written Kadazandusun text will be useful to both Kadazandusun and non-Kadazandusun alike.

### Challenges

KLF recognises that the production process is not the end in itself. KLF actively participates in book fairs and exhibitions to promote the developed materials. One of KLF's challenges is to develop a market for its publications. A possible future step is enabling the schools to use KLF's publications as supplementary material in the classroom. This will familiarise a broad range of readers with Kadazandusun literature. Our ultimate goal is to create a reading culture in the community.

A major first for the Kadazandusun language has been the production of the 'Learning Kadazandusun' CD-ROM. It provides 1,500 words and their English and Malay equivalents, with a pronunciation guide. The CD-ROM is targeted for new language learners, especially school aged children. It displayed the ability of the Kadazandusun language to respond to new technology. The CD-ROM has also given welcome prestige to the relatively new Kadazandusun language efforts. It is hoped that the CD-ROM will expand the market for Kadazandusun publications.

KLF helped to establish a Local Writers' and Illustrators' Network to bring like minds together for support and cooperation. Begun in 1997, the network has the potential to become a strong advocate for preserving and promoting the mother tongue.

Another of KLF's main challenges is to train personnel. More trained trainers who can train others are needed. Local community members need to be trained in the necessary skills to create trained human resources within the community. By supporting on-going professional development, KLF is also supporting capacity building, thus, sustaining the development of the Kadazandusun language.

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