

A language survey to support language revitalization among the Kelabit

by
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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̀wə̀nən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̀wə̀nən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The Indigenous Kelabit of Sarawak are experiencing a language shift as we migrate to the cities from the interior pursuing education and employment. To understand this situation, I conducted a community-wide language survey of the Kelabit language as spoken in the village communities of Lung Napir and Lung Seridan. My main question was to discern the status and health of the Kelabit language in our communities. As a longtime cultural and environmental activist and having authored a dictionary on my language, I considered this survey would be helpful for planning and programming to reverse the current trend in Kelabit.

To frame my research design, I used Indigenous research methodologies combining quantitative and qualitative methods with indigenization of the research process. My research is largely informed by existing theories on language shift and ways of reversing it. The methods I used were conducting language forums, a survey and key informant interviews. The survey investigates the language status, participant's attitude to our language and how they perceive its usefulness into the future as well as the health of the language, with respect to its vitality. I conducted six language forums, attended by 157 people, and 108 who completed the survey.

Of significance to our language status is that our data indicates a large majority of the participants express a positive attitude to our language's future, a clear reflection of the value we place on our Indigenous identity. This is despite an indication that the Kelabit language is 'definitely endangered', used mostly by the parental generation and up. Roughly, a third of the participants do not speak the language, and Elders expressed concern regarding its impacts on our language transmission in the context of mixed-marriages and increasing urbanization.

In terms of the language health, almost three quarters of our people continue to speak the language, giving us much hope in reversing the one third who are not. But an alarming development in our community is that two thirds of families do not speak Kelabit to their children, a clear sign of language endangerment. When language shift happens, it loses its function in a society. The work of reversing involves a community restoring those functions. This phenomenon will guide our future activities, in encouraging language use in our daily communications and social events. Recognizing also that our *adet* (cultural norms), the essence of our identity, and our connection to ancestral land is embedded in our language.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction	1
<i>Purpose Statement of Study</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Research questions</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>What is a language survey?</i>	<i>4</i>
Chapter 2. Literature review	6
<i>Understanding language shift</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Why do languages die?</i>	<i>8</i>
The theory of verticalization	9
The Fishman’s GIDS on determinant of language endangerment	10
Chapter 3. Situating myself	13
Chapter 4. Research Methodology	16
<i>Indigenous methodologies</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>In my context</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Indigenous mixed methods</i>	<i>18</i>
Quantitative and qualitative	19
<i>Methods</i>	<i>20</i>
Survey	20
Language forums	21
Key informant interviews	21
<i>My research process</i>	<i>22</i>
Conducting the survey, forums, and interviews	24
Observing Community Protocol	25
Goals of the survey	27
The questions and the survey process	27
<i>Data collection</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Defining the health of the language?</i>	<i>29</i>
Chapter 5. Research Findings	31
<i>Results that relate to status</i>	<i>31</i>

Age group 16-29 years old	33
Age group 30-49 years old.....	34
Age group 50-79 years old.....	36
Age group 80 years and above.....	37
<i>Results that relate to health</i>	40
Chapter 6. Discussion	51
<i>Significance of the Research</i>	51
<i>Limitations</i>	53
<i>Future directions</i>	55
Conclusion	59
References	61
Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire in Kelabit	65
Appendix B. Survey Questionnaire in English	69
Appendix C. Survey Questionnaire in Bahasa Malaysia	73
Appendix D. Sample consent form in Kelabit	77
Appendix E. Penghulu (Pengulo') Franky Isak Support Letter	79
Appendix F. Summary of Descriptive Statistics	80

List of Tables

Table 1. Attitude to the future of the Kelabit language, whether it will last or not.....	32
Table 2. Future of the Kelabit language by age group	33
Table 3. Location and events where Kelabit language is spoken.....	38
Table 4. Language Fluency According to Age.....	40
Table 5. Daily family language use according to age.....	42
Table 6. Language use in families among singles and married.....	43
Table 7. Daily family language use at home according to geographical location.....	44
Table 8. Daily individual language use by age groupings.....	45
Table 9. Daily individual language use, in term of frequency and according to location.....	46
Table 10. To whom do you speak Kelabit language with?	46
Table 11. Estimated population of Kelabit Meri'it and Seridan as of January 2023	48

Dedication

This project paper is dedicated to our Elders, uncle Balan Riong, Sina' Mili' Ulun, and Sina' Pun Do' Ulun (Sineh Gala'). The late Pun Do' Udeng, Pun Liat, Pun Nu'uh Ulun, Pun Alen, Pun Raja Langit, aunty Pun Do' Siren, Pun Do' Ulun, Pun Do' Kereb, Pun Nu'uh, and Pun Lemula' (Lupung Maren), all who shared with me such insights into our old traditions and oral history. Not forgetting our long-time leader, and collaborator, Jangin Ta'ih Bilung (Pun Mileh), a brave fighter for our land, culture and language.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The Kelabit language of Sarawak in Malaysia is undergoing a critical period. Given what we observe happening from within the community, in our families and from my own field work in language and oral history recordings, there is a real concern that our language is endangered. For instance, in 2018, at a workshop in Miri held by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), participants were asked to rate the status of the language on the vitality index. The Kelabit language was recognized to be at level 3, ‘definitely endangered’, given that “the language is used mostly by the parental generation and up” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 8). Faced with this reality, our community is concerned about the language future and wants to know what we can do to mitigate the situation. This study is in response to this need to better understand the status of our language.

Purpose Statement of Study

The purpose of this project was to conduct a community-wide language survey on the status and health of the Kelabit language as spoken by our two village communities of Lung Napir and Lung Seridan. Although the two communities are situated within different watersheds, the Meri’it and Magoh, we speak the same language variant. To frame my research design, I used Indigenous research methodologies, as identified by Kovach (2021), Absolon (2022), Archibald (2019) and particularly Chilisa (2020), who combines quantitative and qualitative methods with indigenization of the research process.

The study was conducted in Sarawak, Malaysia, among my own Kelabit community. The Kelabit language is part of the Austronesian language family (Blust, 2016), which is spoken widely in Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands. According to the former President of Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) Gerawet Maren (personal communication, February 2022)¹ our language is spoken by roughly 8,800 and is divided unofficially into three geographical variants; the Bario

¹ The Malaysian Department of Statistics, Sarawak, has no current data on Kelabit population. The last census with a discernable number was in 2000.

and Lung Lelleng variant; the Pa' Dalih and Lung Peluan variant; and the Meri'it and Seridan variant. This study is restricted to the language variant of the Meri'it and Seridan as spoken by the two communities of Lung Napir and Lung Seridan, living in the interior areas of the Limbang and Baram. In many ways the two communities are related through blood relations, marriages, and often share ceremonial feasts that alternate between each village. The research site focuses on these two villages, along with three urban communities, Miri, Bintulu, and Limbang where the concentration of people from these two villages is predominantly found.

My research design aims to address the knowledge gap on the status of language shift in our community which is important for mobilization towards language revitalization work. As a member of the community of speakers, I am curious to get answers to some lingering questions, such as, what is really happening to our language today? How widely is it used by the community in the villages and those who have moved to the urban areas? Where are we heading with our language as we look to the future? These are among the most pertinent questions often mooted by our elders and fluent speakers.

Like most Indigenous languages around the world, Kelabit is an endangered language. Despite the many different reasons causing this danger, Dr Lorna Wanosts'a7 Williams reminds us that, "All the Indigenous languages are endangered. There are no exceptions," (personal communication, July 2022). While acknowledging endangerment is a rampant reality, I wanted to understand: how strong and vibrant is its use, or feeble and weak? In other words, if we, the Kelabit, are losing speakers, what are the reasons? In trying to know its status, I wonder, what can we learn from what is happening elsewhere to mitigate the loss of our language or to reverse the shift? Certainly, there is great value for our community in getting answers to these and other pressing questions as we search for appropriate steps in addressing the risks of endangerment. Conducting a survey of our language would certainly provide us with some answers.

As suggested by Linn et al. (2004), a language survey will provide baseline data for our community to see the change over time in the status of our language; whether our planning and programming have created successes that we can maintain, or where improvements can be made. Such baseline data can act as a guidepost, crucial in showing us what has been and where we are heading in our language revitalization.

The community can also use the data for the next step of our language planning in the short and longer term, including what sort of programming strategies will be most appropriate. It can

help us identify what kind of resources we have within the community, such as who are our fluent speakers, and what level of proficiency do they have? Of course, one pertinent question is who our target group will be. Such in-depth and systematic knowledge can support our age-old traditional strategies we inherited from our ancestors in language sustenance and maintenance up to the present moment. Conversely, the survey results can show where the language is spoken less, and among what age groups? Whether we are passing on the language to the younger generation or not? And what are the optimal conditions for sustaining and revitalizing our language that can be fostered? These are important questions for transformation given we have this opportunity to maintain and revitalize our language.

Importantly, the survey, being the first of its kind for Kelabit, aims to reach the widest number of our people to portray what is the happening, as well as to foster a general awareness of language endangerment among our community. My hope is that the dissemination and sharing of the results of the survey can serve to mobilize our community engagement so that they feel some responsibility to involve themselves in our work towards the future of the language. Success in mitigating a language shift comes from our language community and our leaders, in our efforts to establish meaningful roles for everyone. Essentially, the involvement of a large section of the community in the survey ensures the result will be accurate. Community engagement (Degai, et al. 2023) in the survey is essential to provide reliable information or data about our language, a basis for how and where supporting efforts should be targeted. As a member of the Kelabit community I also come to this topic with a long history of grassroots involvement framing my approach to the research. The framework of this research is designed to make the data address the research questions as clear, as accurate, and as unbiased as possible.

Research questions

The main question for this inquiry is: What is the status and health of the Kelabit language among the communities of Lung Napir and Lung Seridan living in the villages and in the urban areas? The question of ‘what’ according to Creswell & Creswell (2022), “is to convey an open and emerging design” (p. 134) representative of a qualitative research question. It is intended to explore the views of the participants rather than the question of ‘why’, which limits the explanations to a cause-and effect, which is typical of a quantitative research question. My

survey questions mostly focus on ‘what’ are the reasons for the language to shift, and some that can explain ‘why’ there is a shift in the language.

Knowing the status and health of our language will enable us to draw a better portrait of the characteristics of our speakers. While investigating how many fluent speakers we have, we also want to know the level of their language fluency, their age, and where are they domiciled. Understanding these types of information and resources, including the prevailing attitudes, can serve to inform future strategies to help sustain the language. This will help inform planning on what are the spaces we need to prioritize in our program efforts, how and what strategies should we use for sustaining and reviving the language.

What is a language survey?

A survey refers to “a study which attempts to uncover and present a broad overview of the linguistic and sociolinguistic facts concerning a specific ethnolinguistic community in a region.” (Blair, 1990, p. 1). As presented in this citation, the language survey aims at providing a general portrait of the linguistic community. When we refer to surveying a language, we are really surveying the people who have a common language speech community, namely, the Kelabit.

There are various reasons why a language survey is conducted. According to Linn et al., (2004), a language survey is an important tool for an Indigenous community as it can determine “the best chance of success” for language programs. She identifies three broad goals of a language survey, namely: “Getting the community aware and involved; creating long-term and short-term goals to work by; and addressing larger issues of language shift” (Linn et al., 2004, p. 2). Indeed, community awareness of our language situation is as crucial as getting the widest number of people involved in the survey process. In the end, the results of the survey will be seen as community property. Having a stake in the survey results makes the community accountable as future collaborators in the language efforts. As mentioned above, this survey will provide baseline data so we can see change over time in our language as it shifts and/or in community attitude. Providing us with a comparison of before and after, sort of “a road map from where we have been and where we are going,” (Linn, et al., 2004, p. 2) in terms of the efforts in reclaiming and revitalizing our language.

In this research, my intention is to gain knowledge about the status and health of our Kelabit language. In other words, I intend to assess the language vitality within the present community of Lung Napir, Lung Seridan and the diaspora communities. Accordingly, I have developed my survey questions to solicit the kind of data that I need to answer this question.

Chapter 2. Literature review

Revitalization efforts that focus on reclaiming and revitalizing languages are now gaining traction through the field of Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR). The idea of language revitalization implies that an endangered language is *slowly* losing its use among the speech communities, where the minority language is shifting towards monolingualism due to encroachment of dominant languages (Hinton, 2018, p. xxii). Indigenous and minority communities are fast losing a generation who no longer speaks the language to be able to pass it on to future generations. Among some Indigenous groups, there are communities who are left with only a few numbers of speakers to be able to maintain or to continue their language. In recent years, Indigenous peoples around the world are rising to meet this challenge in trying to reclaim and revive our languages. These efforts are to establish our relationship to the language in whatever ways we can, including the revival of traditional arts, poetries, songs, rituals, and ceremonies where language is used. These are honorable ways and means of seeking to bring up new generations of speakers.

The historical root of ILR works stems from the movement in decolonizing methodologies which Indigenous scholars began claiming in the mid 1980s (Smith, 2021). The aim, as framed by McIvor (2020), is to “recover the histories and culture of Indigenous peoples and purposefully to ‘deconstructing [sic] precontact and post contact history’, including languages” (p. 79). On a broader scale, language revitalization is aligned with the idea of cultural revival, ways of relating to one another, to the land, animals, plants, and reviving traditional protocols and spirituality. In response to the history of oppression and forced assimilation, language revitalization is seen as paths to healing, justice, and empowerment (McIvor 2020). Indeed, the continued use and/or revitalization of traditional Indigenous lifeways and Indigenous language has been shown to have a positive physical health effect (Whalen, Moss, & Baldwin, 2016). McKenzie (2022) refers to the revitalization of Indigenous languages as central to consider in supporting healing and the well-being of Indigenous communities into the future.

Understanding language shift

The following literatures are reviewed for our understanding of how and why language shift occurs, followed by some elements of maintenance. To begin with, what do we mean by language maintenance and shift? Language maintenance is defined as “a situation where language remains competitive with the dominant or majority language,” whereas language shift is defined as “the gradual replacement of one’s main language labelled as L1, by another language, usually referred to as L2, in all spheres of its usage.” (Pauwels 2016, as cited in Brown & Salmons, 2022, p. 2). In the context of the Kelabit (L1), there is tremendous pressure to use Bahasa Malaysia and English (L2) in our social, economic, political and academic spheres.

For us to understand language maintenance and shift, it is important to know how “the community first became bilingual in the majority and minority languages and then eventually shifted entirely to the majority language” (Brown & Salmons, 2022, p. 3). However, social scientists and linguists have yet to come up with a general theory on language maintenance and shift that is broadly accepted in the field. The subject is quite complex which demands a multi-discipline approach in research to reach a consensus. Brown and Salmons (2022) in their article says that there is a “lack of any kind of a broad cross-linguistic sample built around what we know as a relevant aspect of an analysis,” and call for a “focused cross-linguistic research on maintenance and shift” in “understanding language in the *world’s* communities.” (p.24).

Traditionally, the study of language maintenance and shift has gained traction more in “sociolinguistics and the sociology of language”, while it is “marginally *adopted* in linguistics” (Brown & Salmons 2022, p. 1). Below, I will briefly discuss some theories pertinent to the question(s) I have on the status and health of our language relating to language maintenance and shift. First, I present a theory on why and how a language in the Pacific Island of Papua New Guinea was allowed to disappear by its speech community. Second, I discuss verticalization, a theory of understanding how the pattern of community structures affects multilingual use in a community, leading to language shift. Whereas Fishman’s GIDS is a theory on the different levels of language disruption or endangerment in a community, determining its capacity for revival or not. Other theories and measurement standards exist on language endangerment, including the United Nations’ “Vitality Index,” but suffice to say, the above are sufficient explanation for our situation.

Why do languages die?

Don Kulick, a cultural anthropologist wrote a book, *A Death in the Rainforest* (2019), which is an account of his ethnography of language and social change. The main topic of his research is Tayap, the language of the Gapun, which they are about to abandon, and the rise of Tok-pisin, one of the national languages of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Tok-pisin is a product of the colonial plantations system and was seen as a prestige language, a language of the dominant culture and of modernity. Over several decades, men went out to work in the cash crop plantations, they brought back material goods coveted by the community, and surely, “Tok-pisin consolidated itself in the village” (p. 34). But the arrival of Christianity was the “decisive entrenchment of the language” (p. 35), where weekly church services and rituals were conducted mainly in Tok-pisin.

According to Kulick, the Tayap language is dying because in Gapun “Tok-pisin was incorporated into the villager’s linguistic repertoire at the expense of their own vernacular” (p.38). This study vividly demonstrates how Gapuners everyday practices and ways of thinking can give rise to language shift and influence its progression. He gives the analogy of how Tayap, the vernacular, dies; “by contracting, by having its layers of complexity peeled off like an onion skin, getting smaller and smaller until there is finally nothing left” (p. 138). Ultimately, the children, as bearers of the ancestral language, were no longer learning to speak Tayap. He claims that languages, like cultures, are not destined to fade away, naturally. “They die because people stop speaking them” (Kulick, 2019, p. 26). In other words, languages are driven out of existence by identifiable forces. Those forces, according to Kulick are the six ‘variables’ within the Gapuner society, which renders the community more or less ‘open’ to language shift. Several other variables accounted for these shifts and loss of the ancestral language, including consideration of the majority language as being superior and part of being modern, as well as the socialisation of children that prevent them from speaking their language.

Indeed, Kulick’s extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Gapuners fascinates me, including his profound account of language shift happening in this Indigenous community. His rich analysis of the everyday lives within the community is the result of a tenacious search for understanding why and how a language shift occurs. Over an intermittent period of three decades, his fieldwork culminated in a theory of language change, which is enlightening for me as I try to comprehend the status of my own language.

His work and the theory he proposed for language shift, is most relevant to our situation, because the small community of Gapun is in many ways comparable to our Kelabit community where my research was located. The Kelabit also live in isolated villages far from urban centers, with Malay as the official language of the market economy, services and education. When our community turned *en masse* to Christianity in the 1940s, this phenomenon later contributed to a major language shift in the villages. Where weekly church services in the community are largely conducted in Malay language, instead of Kelabit, and clergies who do not know the local language were posted into our interior churches (Kulick 2019; Warren 1978, in Brown & Salmons, p.12). In the Kelabit context, a sustained urban migration in subsequent years allow for a quick assimilation into dominant cultures and languages.

As Kelabit (L1) speakers, our language may be losing out to the dominant languages of Malay and, or English (L2) for several reasons. In the last four decades, with the advent of logging roads, in some instances, airfields, our territories have experienced an open and ‘porous’ border for our people to engage with the wider world outside the community. This resulted in a change in the traditional socio-economic structures where now, interactions between the urban and the villages have increased drastically. This phenomenon is categorized by Salmons (2005, as cited in Brown & Salmons 2022, p. 1), as a process of verticalization which I turn to below.

The theory of verticalization

Another model of language shift that I find relevant to draw upon is the verticalization model proposed by Salmons (Salmons 2005, in Brown & Salmons, 2022, p. 1), which builds on the model of community theory by Warren in 1978. Its focus is on understanding the patterns of community structure affecting language use in bilingual communities, and Kelabit community is largely bilingual. This means analysing how bilingual community connects and interacts with external society and institutions, called verticalization, as opposed to the interactions of community among themselves, called horizontal structures or plane. The more the language community expand their relationship structure with external society, including the repertoire of an external language, the more they may lose the use of their own language. Meanwhile, if they strengthen their horizontal pattern or internal structure, they can maintain their language and

culture better. In short, this is how linguistic minority or Indigenous language communities are undergoing shift from their ancestral language (L1) to another (L2).

Findings by Frey (2022), indicate that verticalization played a major role in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in the US, a shift from Cherokee to English. He attributed the community-wide language shift was due to the establishment of the first Eastern Cherokee boarding schools in 1875 (p.156). By 1955, a sizeable community began growing up monolingual in English. Through the course of the 20th century, more and more local structures and institutions establish connections with external society due to the establishment of National Parks in their territory, a highway, the advancement of tourism, paving the way for more connections with industries, including hotels and grocery stores, and a mobile manual labour force. “As local associate more and more with people from the outside demand for English proficiency increases, and social domains for use of Cherokee declined.” (p.164).

Verticalization rests on a clear thesis: shift follows if *bilingual* communities give up horizontal patterns in favor of vertical ones (Brown & Salmons, 2022, p. 18). However, these changes in the community structures happen over a period of time. The theory of verticalization is an element that I paid close attention to in my survey design and analysis.

While authors like Kulick refer to ‘language death’, I consider this to be an alarmist and defeatist notion about the current situation of Indigenous languages. Although minority languages are in danger of shifting, there has been an Indigenous language revitalization movement globally including in Canada and the United States, to maintain and revive their languages (McIvor, 2020). As a student of Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR), I turn my gaze towards work on ILR that can contribute to reversing our language shift.

The Fishman’s GIDS on determinant of language endangerment

Another important theory of relevance to my research is Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), from *Reversing Language Shift* (2001), that identifies the critical role of language in minority and Indigenous communities. Joshua Fishman’s 8-level GIDS has been regularly used by practitioners of language revitalization in determining whether languages are endangered. Relevant aspects of GIDS show where the language is on the scale of disruption from “full use by many users to no use by any users” (Lewis & Simons, 2010, p. 6).

Stage 8 is the most advanced level of shift, which means the language itself needs to be “reassembled” (Brown & Salmons, 2022, p. 6). while category 1 or Level 1, is the level of least disruption or the “safest.” In stage 8, the remaining speakers are “socially isolated folks,” such as elders as the first speakers, and the language must be “re-assembled from their mouth and memories.” At stage 1, the least disrupted, the language is use in higher education, occupational, governmental and media efforts.

According to Lewis & Simons, GIDS “remains the foundational conceptual model for assessing the status of language vitality” (2010, p. 4). It considers that the key to successful revitalization effort is to focus on the intergenerational transmission of language within the family, community, and neighbourhood contexts. If children are not learning the language from their parents, there will be less chance that the language will be passed on to the next generation. Fishman identified indicators in society where language is used, each called a ‘domain’, or function. Domains are the ways that we interact with language such as speaking and listening, reading and writing, including the use of digital media. When the domain of language use erodes, language shift begins. In other words, for a language to remain healthy and alive it must continue to have function in the life within the speech community.²

The significance of Fishman’s GIDS is that it serves not only to predict language shift, but also to identify planning priorities for language revitalization, so that future efforts are directed to where they are most effective. At each level up the sacel, the focus of revitalization would be in strengthening the status of the language until it reaches the ideal stage at Level 1, which represents the language most vital category.

I consider Fishman’s GIDS model to be most useful in planning for a reversal of language shift within our speech community. I had envisioned that the Kelabit language survey will help us identify where our language domain use remains strong, where we can direct our efforts in strengthening these. By utilizing the Fishman GIDS to work through the stages identified, we can stabilize bilingualism and apply its practical tools to reversing shift in L1. Ideally, it means that our efforts should increase the number of Kelabit speakers in the community.

² *Speech community* are groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties and practices. While we are born with the ability to learn language, we do so within the confines of cultures and societies framing the process of learning how to talk to others. (Cambridge University, 2014).

In summary, Kulick's decade of studies among the Gapuners, presents the reality of how a minority language can eventually sleep³ when speakers abandon it for another so-called prestige variety. In a similar vein, the theory of verticalization re-articulates the reason why a language like Tayap sleeps. Verticalization occurs when a bilingual community is bent on focusing its socio-economic structures towards its relationship to the dominant, or external world, at the expense of their local socio-economic structures (horizontal plane). Finally, Fishman's GIDS presents to us the different levels at which the use of a language degraded over time, causing endangerment and provides the element of possible restoration at each stage. All three theories presented here are compatible to understand how language becomes endangered and how we can revive it. It must be noted that language shift does not occur in an instant, but it takes place over several generations. As noted by Brown & Salmons (2022), when language shift happens it "shows a coherent pattern, not piecemeal...it comes as a package" (p.18).

Prior to presenting my methodology I find it important to situate myself; where I come from and why this subject is personally important research for me to undertake.

³ A language that sleeps denotes a language which currently has no fluent speakers

Chapter 3. Situating myself

My work is located within the two Kelabit communities of Lung Napir and Lung Seridan, in the interior of the Limbang and Baram divisions in Sarawak. We are relatives and we share a common language variant, the Meri'it-Seridan Kelabit. Briefly, I will introduce myself and my experiences, as it relates to why I embark on this important research trajectory.

Ngadan uih biré lun merar kudih Mutang Murud. The name given to me by my parents is Mutang Murud, which is made up of several word meanings. Mutang comes from a combination of two words **Mudut** and **Atang**: *mudut* means to build or to shape something from hard material such as wood, or it can also mean to build abstract things such as raising a family. While *atang* is the beam of a longhouse or any building structure. Mount **Murud**, is the highest mountain in Sarawak (at 2,242m). As for my official last name **Urud**, it is a spelling error on the part of the Birth and Death Registration of Malaysia. My ancestors migrated from the 'foothills' of this great mountain, the Murud in the early 1800s, to live in the Meri'it watershed where we are presently located, prompting my parents to memorialize this migratory route during a *Mekaa' Ngadan*,⁴ name-change ritual. They took on the same name, Temabu' Tameh **Murud** (Murud *a father whose first child is a beloved son*) and Senabu' Sineh Murud (Murud *a mother whose first child is a beloved son*), and thus my full name should be Mutang Murud. A Kelabit child will take on their parent's name as a family name. Sometimes the name of their grandparent was included to enliven and perpetuate the memory of their leadership or enable them to connect to a wider kinship circle. Both my parents were born into an ancestry of community leaders.

For many years, I have been involved in the international Indigenous movement at the United Nations on the environment and Indigenous rights. I started my grassroots activism work

⁴ A uniquely Kelabit tradition of changing names parallel with a change in social status, such as when a couple has their first child, and later, when they become grandparents. The old names are discarded, from then on, they will be identified with the new ones. Their change-name would also denote whether their first child is a girl or a boy. *Senabu'* comes from the word *sinan abu'*, mother of a beloved son; likewise, for *tamemu'*, *taman emu'*, father of a beloved daughter.

in the early 1980s with the Kelabit and Penan communities, and several other communities in the interior of Northeast of Sarawak. After being constantly harassed by the Sarawak authorities for my human rights and environmental activism I came to Canada to study. Unable to complete my undergraduate degree due to continued activism responsibilities, I undertook to work for a decade with a First Nation's outdoor cultural program, Rediscovery International. My involvement with the program brought me in close contacts with many Indigenous groups in Canada. In particular, I witnessed the inter-generational impacts of colonialism on the Indigenous communities and witnessed their resiliency and push-back on unjust policies, which include their cultures and languages. The work experience deepened my resolve to use my awareness and knowledge to continue working with my own community. Subsequently, I completed my degree in Cultural Anthropology, which I started at University of British Columbia and completed at Concordia University in Montreal.

From 2012 until 2016, with the support of the Tides foundation grant, I was able to return to Sarawak to conduct several years of field research, recording the oral history of my people, and conducting cultural and territorial mapping of our ancestral land. The research resulted in the completion of the first Kelabit dictionary in Borneo (Urud (Murud), 2021), and a first for any of the language. Attending the Master in Indigenous Education under the Indigenous Language Revitalization (MILR) program, at the University of Victoria, BC, was intentional, so I could learn the methods and strategies for teaching and revitalizing languages. Through this program, I have had the opportunity to learn many lessons on Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) and maintenance programs within First Nations communities both in Canada and globally. I am keen to implement some of the lessons I have learned with my own people, the Kelabit, and other Indigenous communities in Sarawak.

Regardless of my personal association with the communities in my research area, I am approaching this research methodologically with an Indigenous concern. I am concerned because the trend of language shift among our Indigenous communities world-wide is worrying. And there is a robust countermovement to reverse this trend from global Indigenous grassroots activists and scholars who are necessarily people coming from their own language community. An approach that is supported by research in language revitalization is a successful model that has been proven by many Indigenous communities such as the Hawaiian, Māori, Sámi, and many

Canadian and North American Indigenous peoples. After returning and working with my community for the last decade on language and culture, I am aware that our leaders and community members are equally concerned about these issues.

As an insider researcher, my perspective can be regarded as biased, but I have a history of experiences, rich cultural and community knowledge that an outsider is ill prepared to spend their energy and time in. Such tacit knowledge (not explicit nor implicit) is one that only an insider can easily capture, document and articulate. This knowledge, including skills and judgement have been acquired through my hands-on involvement and experiences with my own community over the years. Community-based research can be challenging. In the words of Smith (2021), this “‘insider’ dynamics...takes considerable sensitivity, skill, maturity, experience, and knowledges to work things through.” (p.10). Such skills and experiences are valuable in giving credibility, relevance, and legitimacy to my research in ways that are unique. As Alcoff (2007) also notes, one’s identity does not “yield knowledge in and of itself, but it contains resources from which new knowledges can be developed with critical and theoretical reflections” (p. 46).

In summary, the long history of my work experiences with my community and the international Indigenous movement, is an opportunity to begin aligning my works in research to augment Indigenous worldviews in the academic world.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology

In this study, I chose to situate my research on Indigenous methodologies, while drawing on mixed methods. Below, I present my methodological approach, followed by my specific research methods and finally my research process.

Indigenous methodologies

At the outset, Indigenous methodologies are important as they recognize the need for practices that are “more respectful, ethical, sympathetic, and useful” (Smith 2021, p. 9) to communities. This is central given our experiences are localized and specific to our communities. Although in the context of Sarawak, research among Indigenous communities has been less prevalent and damaging, than, for example, in places such as North America and Europe (Smith, 2021). This research is generally informed by Indigenous methodologies that centre on relationality and the importance of responsibility (Wilson, 2008). While Western frameworks have generally dominated approaches to research, I see value in conceptualizing my research in a framework that is relevant to my people and our cultural ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2020; Templeton, 2021). Indigenous peoples throughout history have often been oppressed by the dominant groups where we struggle to make our worldviews known. As Smith (2021) says, to counter these oppressive systems, there is increasing focus on participatory action research and decolonizing research processes.

As Indigenous researchers, Smith (2021) implored the need to develop and “articulate research practices that arise out of the specificities of epistemology and methodology rooted in survival struggles.”⁵ Indigenous knowledge provides the base for new concepts, theories, forms of analysis, and new forms of methods and practices. For instance, I am inspired by Kovach’s (2021), Daniels (2021) use of a Nehiyaw conceptual framework and Rosborough’s (2012) Kangextola framework based on the metaphor of the button blanket.

⁵ Patti Lather, back cover acknowledgement to Linda T. Smith’s (2021) *Decolonizing Methodologies*

In my context

Throughout this project, I try to draw on examples from my own experiences in community, that my “research will augment *or* enrich the academic discourse of the Western academy” that this “research will best serve the interests of *my own community*” (Chilisa, 2020, p.96). More specifically, I am informed by the Kelabit process of making the long rattan mat, *ugam uwé*⁶, as representing an Indigenous methodology that is relevant to my context. Indigenous research methodology is like making the *ugam uwé*, a long rattan mat, which lays prominently on the floor of every Kelabit family open verandah *tawa*’ of a traditional longhouse. The long mat covers the thick slabs of bare wooden floor, where the house occupants and guests gather to relax, retelling stories of the day, or for children to play about. Importantly, the uninterrupted expanse of the verandah is a prime space for feastings, holding rituals and ceremonies, including holding communal court sessions, *besara’ adet*.

There is a special geographical place where the medium size rattan species *uwé suko* (*calamus sp.*) is found. It can take three days or more to harvest and bring these back to the village. At this special place you can be sure to harvest the quality of rattan with a maximum length of 6-8 feet long for a premium mat. Several hundred pieces must be harvested and spliced *ngupa* lengthwise into four pieces. Before the pieces gets dry, the side of each piece lengthwise is evenly shaved *meru* through a sharp metal contraption call *iyu peruwé*, shaving knives. Separately, a long wooden piece, the length of the rattan pieces is crafted in a square form *kayuh penuat*, with four narrowly gauged cavity lengthwise on all sides to accommodate each piece of the split rattan. The four pieces of rattan are secured in these grooves of the *penuat* wood, tied secure, and are pierced through lengthwise about 4 inches apart.

Once pierced and retrieved, these rattan pieces must be tied together to maintain a harmonious pattern created by the rattan nodes throughout the mat. Before being stitched together, *ngerur*, the pieces are dried under the sun for a week or more, to strengthen and lighten the materials. When sufficiently dried, several long ropes will be needled each of the slits *ngenuuk*, to hold tightly the hundred pieces of rattan together. Finally, both ends of the mat (head and toe) are strengthened with more elaborate rattans stitches, *meped*, holding the entire piece firmly together. For practical purposes, the length of a long-mat averages between 12-18 feet.

⁶ *Ugam* means mat, while *uwé* is rattan.

Each family will have several of these long rattan mats. Since they are very durable, they can last many decades, and they are included as a family heirloom to be passed down from one generation to another. I relate research to the making of an *ugam uwé* as a complex and time-consuming process, Whereby the product serves as a powerful metaphor in knowledge creation from its benign everyday use to the sacredness of the *adet* process. I will now discuss Indigenous ways of doing research, combining with the quantitative and qualitative methods.

Indigenous mixed methods

I situate my research in specifically in the context of Indigenous mixed methods (MMR), as discussed by Chilisa (2020) in *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Herein qualitative and quantitative methods are framed and combined with Indigenous methodologies. As Creswell and Plano Clark suggest, MMR's "central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone" (2007, p.5, as cited in Chilisa, 2020, p. 150). The MMR Indigenous methods are necessarily to clarify the relationship between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing so that "more appropriate theories, practices, and relations can be develop for their interaction (Botha, 2011, p. 314, as cited in Chilisa, 2020, p. 159). This mixed method is not just going for the middle ground, rather it is, as Chilisa points out "an attempts to counteract appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and create a new qualitative Indigenous method" (p.160). Mixed methods research (MMR) "considers the methodologies of combining Western and Indigenous knowledge as distinct paradigms in Indigenous research" (Chatwood et al., 2015, as cited in Chilisa, 2020, p.149). Or as Chilisa (2020) defined MMR as, research within the philosophical frames of an Indigenous paradigm. Indigenous research methods challenge Euro-Western methodologies and contribute to a new method informed by Indigenous worldviews and philosophies.

In the academic field there is a systemic challenge making it necessary to bring together diverse perspectives and ways of knowing, particularly in Indigenous research. The academic training involves years of individuals developing disciplinary methods in their field under the frameworks of Western traditions. Whereas an Indigenous research paradigm is based on relational ontology, epistemology, and axiology, it can differ significantly from the Western

paradigm, giving rise to recent emphasis on a framework that concerns Indigenous methodologies... “as the practices and processes of the research are conceived and frame through the Indigenous standpoint.” (Walter & Andersen, 2013, p.83 in Chilisa, 2020, p. 149). Many Indigenous scholars have now come up with Indigenous research methodologies that has informed my own research, such as Smith, 2021; Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2019; Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2021; and Wilson, 2008.

Quantitative and qualitative

Being newer to research, I must acknowledge that first I had to understand the meaning and use of qualitative and quantitative methods before embarking on MMR. This involved identifying the different purposes of each method.

Quantitative research seeks objective, numerical data and statistical analysis, while qualitative research explores subjective experiences and social constructs. To approach a design with quantitative intent, researchers often start with one or more hypotheses (investigative & exploratory methods) and the relationships between the variables they want to investigate. The design must also factor in stricter forms of methodology and tools used to measure and validate the collected data, a clear plan of action, a statistical procedure to analyze data (coding), and a valid way to present these results (graphs). Statistics help us to understand the world around us, allowing us to “make decisions based on empirical evidence and not our own biases or beliefs.” (Salkind, 2007, p. 10). Objectivity in a quantitative approach is highly valued. As a result, researchers go to great lengths so that the results of their research are untarnished by their own presence, behavior, or expectations. To achieve objectivity, researchers must conduct self-examination such that their methods or conclusions are free of unwarranted biases or presumptions. Conducting a quantitative language survey results in statistical analysis of data, according to Salkind, “statistics *therefore* is a scientific method.” (2007, p. 14).

In contrast, qualitative methods explore the underlying reasons, the why, for a specific trend or observation. It is concerned with observing and uncovering the social constructs that human societies are framed in and looks at the significance of the human experience in the lens

of beliefs, behaviors, and emotions. While qualitative research also uses some form of quantitative analysis, the way it collects data allows for greater freedom. Unlike quantitative methods that gather and collate data in computer-readable forms to be crunched later, qualitative approaches record data in numerous formats from observation, transcripts and interaction with the subjects. In addition, the methods used vary wildly, with open-ended, exploratory, and wide-ranging processes.

Descriptive statistics help us to describe the characteristics of a collection of data or data set. Where data are collected and organized allowing us to represent the characteristics of a large collection of data. In my survey for example, descriptive statistics summarizes the most common places where the language is spoken (mode). Or to know the average age of our fluent speakers, we use the means to identify this variable.

Below, I outline the methods I proposed and have responded to my research question on the status and health of the Kelabit language.

Methods

The aim of my research is to understand the situation and issues affecting our language status and health. The three methods I chose to collect the information or data for this language survey were: (1) survey questions to be completed in person or online, (2) language forums and dialogue in the communities and (3) key informant interviews, particularly with Elders. Below, I describe the purpose of these methods and in the next section my research process.

Survey

The survey provided quantitative data on the status and health of our language. I chose this method to draw an account of our language providing details on the characteristics of our speakers. The survey method is also relevant as it had to be completed voluntarily and requires participants to reflect on their answers.

Survey questions were asked to solicit participants ideas and responses to each research question; firstly, on the status, and secondly, on health of the Kelabit language (see Appendix A,

B, and C). The type of questions asked were, which language do they speak daily as individual and with whom do they speak it? Do they speak Kelabit with their families at home, in their workplace or during social gatherings and church services? Is there anyone else that they interact with in the language? Participants are to make a choice from three of the commonly used languages in the community, Kelabit, Malay, and English. There are 26 questions to my survey which I replicated in all three methods I chose.

In terms of the language status, the degree to which the language is being used daily, either at home or with the family, reflects the importance of why Kelabit is chosen over the dominant languages (Malay and English). Such decision must be a conscious action on the speaker to want to maintain Kelabit as part of her or his repertoire of languages.

Language forums

The forums were also conducted in the format of a dialogue, where it is an opportunity to engage our community through discussion about our language situation, people's use and experiences with it, and their attitude, ideas, and opinions about its future. The forum is a relevant approach in our community, reflecting Indigenous *adet*, protocol of *pegayam* (to dialogue), a process of engaging the community when new ideas or developments are brought in that affect the community directly. After the forum, my assistants and I distributed the survey forms to the participants to bring home. Many chose to complete the survey questions right there.

Key informant interviews

The key informant interviews are important. These were directed at our Elders who are traditional first speakers (L1) of the language. I chose to personally conduct these interviews as it was important for me to connect with them and understand their feelings, given that some of them felt ambivalent towards the educated urban relatives who seem to have a disregard for their ideas and participation. As a generation of speakers (L1) who grew up entirely speaking the language, and lived in the context of our traditional culture, they have a critical longitudinal view on the language and its current trajectories. Their thoughts and ideas are particularly important in informing my research (for my consent form in Kelabit see Appendix D).

Together, these three methods will allow me to discuss the status and health of our language and recommend areas that we could work on to plan for language maintenance and revitalization. I will now turn to my research process conducted within my communities.

My research process

My research required at the outset seeking permission from our leaders to work with members of the two communities (an invitation letter was included in the UVic ethics application). Although I have a close relationship to the participants, I needed to be clear and transparent about the purpose of the research activities, as well as ensure I had the support of community leaders. I applied Wilson's (2008) notion of relational accountability, whereby research is located in a community context, and it must "demonstrate respect, reciprocity and responsibility" (p. 99). I was always reminded that every step of the research is a process that requires attention to issues of ethics and power (Battiste, 2008; Ishimaru & Bang, 2022), to ensure community members value and feel they are part of the research.

After receiving permission from community leaders (see example Appendix E), together with some of our volunteers, my assistants and I made personal phone calls to potential participants, initiated social media contacts via Instagram, WhatsApp, and email to key members of the community on the project objectives. Considering that our community is religious, making church announcements during weekly Sunday mass was an important strategy to reach out to the general population.

The process of doing a language survey involves the community of speakers. Initially, I was apprehensive thinking that the idea of language ideologies expressed earlier by some members can create uncertainty in the process, since diverging opinions can discourage people from participating. At the same time, given my close relationship with my community I was confident I would make the process successful. For more than a decade I have been able to return and work closely with my own community of Lg Napir and occasionally visited relatives in Lg Seridan, visiting elders and participating in cultural and religious activities. I have interviewed many of our elders previously as I have a nostalgia for piecing together our oral history. Their life stories are the connecting dots in our oral history as a community and their ages are key to

the knowledge connecting our family trees. For we are all related and the younger generations are unaware of these connections; the ties that binds us as a people.

I had a vague idea of how to conduct my final language survey among our community. Ten months earlier, I have conducted a pilot survey with both the village community of Lg. Seridan and Lg. Napir, where survey questions were distributed to community members personally and through assistants in the village. As a result, 38 survey forms were returned. This preliminary data showed that the community felt the language is not spoken as much not only among the younger generations, but also among fluent speakers and their families living in the urban centres. However, the pilot survey was an important step in developing the final survey. It allowed me to reword ambiguous questions to improve clarity, and the questions were expanded to ensure quality responses. Importantly, this first step helped for the final survey to run smoothly and obtain more reliable results.

I planned to conduct the final survey and the forums with our communities in a span of two months. Knowing the seasonal activities of our community, it would be best during public holidays such as school holidays or at the end of the year, where most families would be available. However, I only managed to get back to Sarawak in mid-December 2023, a time when the fervor for Christmas holidays was already keeping people busier than usual. To take advantage of the presence of a linguist friend visiting Sarawak, I hastily conducted the first public forum in a hotel in Miri that was announced through various community WhatsApp Groups (WAG) and the wider Kelabit WAG. There were 19 people who attended, and while small, it was a very successful gathering, with community leaders and representatives of the two communities present including a senior representative of the national Kelabit Association of Sarawak. We had quality interactions and discussions and representation. Having the event recorded on video also enabled it to be rebroadcasted broadly to the public on social media.

One of the reasons for planning the survey at the end of the year was to coincide with the printing of the Kelabit dictionary. It would be a timely and wonderful opportunity for this long-awaited publication to be presented to my community and the public. However, publication and printing did not happen as planned, it took months of going back and forth between the publisher and the printer to ensure product quality. Not to mention the ordeal of shipping the product from Kuala Lumpur to Sarawak during Christmas and the New Year.

Before the Christmas celebration many other ceremonies such as weddings and name-change rituals were conducted. I was able to attend two of my relatives' Name-Change celebrations (Mekaa' Ngadan), one each in Lg Seridan and in Lg Napir. My presence at these two ceremonies was a perfect opportunity for laying the groundwork to organize the future language forum and survey distribution. This was augmented by the broadcasting on social media of a video I narrated regarding one of these name-change ceremonies.⁷

My language survey had to be delayed for another two-and-half weeks after Christmas, while I had to participate in a grass root effort to rally communities, scientists, and politicians, to investigate the possibility of securing a large section of our rainforest area for protection under the IUCN OECM biodiversity criteria. During this period, the dictionary was printed, and copies couriered to Sarawak, and I organized to host the additional forums. Having sufficiently interacted with the communities, as one of them, they understood my motive and my works. And having copies of the printed dictionaries in hand made it easier to plan in a short period of time.

Conducting the survey, forums, and interviews

My second forum took place in Bintulu, an industrial town, where many of our community work and reside. In fact, several weeks earlier, I had asked a few key people to organize the venue and to inform, through social media, our Kelabit relatives there. The space was full, and food was plentiful. Families with their teenagers and children came. The facilitator came up with a Kelabit *pantun*, Malay for poetry, which he wrote about the event. I presented a 45-minute talk with slides, about the state of Indigenous languages worldwide, and where our own language stands according to UN vitality index. I advocated the need for their participation in the future works for our language. There were lots of questions and many dictionaries were distributed and signed. The young people showed much enthusiasm about the dictionary, and I was thrilled to interact with them. There were about 35 people who attended; it was truly a community gathering.

By now a niece was delegated as an agent for the distribution of the dictionary, and to organize the third forum in the town of Miri (the second time it was conducted in this city), but this time with dictionary in hand, 21 people attended. The same system was created for the fourth

⁷ see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guansdg2LaU>

language forum in Limbang town where our chief, Penghulu Franky was tasked in organizing our folks there (with 23 participants). Both towns boasted success with many age groups participating. I was thrilled to meet with many of the young people (nieces and nephews) I haven't met before. Everyone scrambled to buy the dictionary.

There was a consensus among participants that promoting the use of the language despite being in the urban centres, is an important task for the community. And there were many questions asked related to how to get the young people interested in the language; how do we make the language relevant for the present generation, and how fluent speakers can organize ourselves to help maintain the use of the language into the future?

For the fifth language forum, I went to Lg Seridan. By now, I had reconnected with all three chieftains, the two penghulus (regional chiefs) and two headmen, who are relatives of mine. With their permission, several key people were gathered at one of their homes. It was the first public gathering in this community I conducted (13 participants). I began with a profuse greeting of thanks for the privilege of being hosted, and began my talk guided by my Power Point presentation. This was followed by a dialogue which lasted until after midnight.

Observing community protocol

Every step of the research is a process requires attention to issues of ethics and power to ensure community members are genuine co-participants and co-producers of the survey results (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022). This is part of my research that centers on Indigenous methodologies.

For a successful community meeting to take place, it is important to have their involvement from the beginning. As Smith noted, "Negotiating entry into a community or a home can also be daunting for Indigenous researchers" (2021, p.136). For months, I had prepared myself for this moment through establishing a constant rapport with the communities and their leaders. Besides that, I have had the opportunity to run several other projects within the community prior to this and having that privilege of the contacts of relatives in all these communities. It is to them that I have reached out for help when organizing the forums.

Each forum in the village started with the village headman giving an opening greeting to everyone who has come, briefly touched on the purpose of our gathering, and the importance of our language. In the city, a community leader or representative is tasked with facilitating the

programs. Often, the facilitator reminds the attendees how grateful they are given that the presenter had to travel so far while living in foreign lands, to care for issues that challenge the community.

Before the discussion starts, someone offers a prayer for spiritual guidance and wisdom, so that our discussion will be successful and proceed smoothly till the end. Sometime, community notices are also brought up as reminder to the participants that gathered.

As a presenter, I often start with thanking the community for hosting me, to everyone who helped make the meeting possible, and finally, addressing the attendees. To make the talk interesting I asked many intriguing questions about our language. For example, can you tell me how many languages there are in the world? Where is the origin and the beginning of our language? Why do we have the different variants? Which variant of Kelabit are you speaking? How many languages do you speak? I included the state of our Kelabit language based on the UNESCO⁸ Vitality and Endangerment index (2003), at the same time, touching on the language's future, how we can promote the use of the language given our current situation, giving examples of successful language transmission in the urban settings e.g., how some grandparents have become teachers of the language to their grandchildren as they baby-sat them while the parents are at work; and the two Penan mothers living in Europe who single-handedly taught their children to speak their mother-tongue despite the odds. Then I touched on the UN, how it has recognized the fragility and need for Indigenous languages like ours to be protected, in creating the UNIDIL 2022-2032, requesting that nations, including Malaysia and stakeholders to actively promote Indigenous languages globally. I said that it is also now our responsibility to ensure our language continues as our ancestors have intended it to be, that my personal motivation is not to be part of a generation that allows the demise of our language. As one of our elders warned, that to be complacent in speaking it will result in the language '*putut buet*',⁹ to disappear! Yet, I implored, the reason we are able to gather together like this concerning our language is because we all care absolutely about its future.

⁸ Where level 5 is considered 'safe' and 0 is extinct.

⁹ Literal translation, an abrupt cut-off.

Goals of the survey

The goal of these forums was to create awareness about our language and to mobilize our community (Linn, et al., 2004, p. 6) both in the two villages and those living in the urban areas. Eventually, engaging them is one of the objectives, more so is having them to realize they have a stake in the survey results so that they feel some responsibility to involve themselves in our work towards the future of the language (Linn, et al., 2004, p. 6). The gathering of community members together with our leaders has been an encouraging development and a testimony to our collective sentiment for the language. I have had trepidation about this moment; however, the gatherings went smoothly which catapulted my sense of urgency regarding our language's future. Language shift is a complex transformation for a speech community, as acknowledged by researchers from disciplines in linguistics to socio-anthropologists (Brown & Salmons, 2022), but it should be dealt with in a way that must include the participation of the community. With the smooth running of the forums and surveys, I felt that it has built much confidence in our community and an anticipation in the outcome of the process.

The questions and the survey process

Largely, I have adhered to the principle as outlined in my ethics forms during the entire survey process that the survey is taken. For me, the question of conducting myself in an ethical manner with our community is not alien, for these same values are part of our *adet*, our customary laws of conduct. Firstly, I reminded the participants that their participation is treated anonymously, and they should not feel under pressure to participate. They had a choice of three translations for the question forms, in Kelabit, English, and Malay. About 70 % of the survey was taken in this manner, while 30% of the surveys were either conducted online via a QR code process or administered independently by an assistant. A small number were taken by the author through in-person interviews particularly with Elders. The question forms were distributed as a take-home form, but most of the completed survey forms were conducted after the forums. (Please refer to the sample survey question forms, in the Appendix).

Data collection

Three hundred copies of the survey were distributed between the five communities. Of the total, 108 survey forms were completed and returned, while 8 were incomplete, the rest were either not returned or were not distributed to the communities. The success rate with the QR code survey method was very encouraging, primarily used by the young people. Overall, this gives the survey response rate to be 36%, which is considered a high percentage rate of return ($108/300 \times 100\% = 36\%$) while an average rate of return in a survey is below thirty percent. There are a wide variety of factors that can impact a survey⁶, in our case, the most important being how engaged our audience is with the issue of our language endangerment. Besides, our audience is small with a long history of cultural interactions, so the use of incentives for the survey was not necessary. Whereas in a large survey involving longitudinal research, it is common to use incentives to obtain a successful rate of return (Singer, 1999).

I was able to conduct six language forums or focus groups, *pegayam*, one in each village community (Lung Napir and Seridan) and three in the city and towns where many of our community members now reside (Miri, Bintulu, and Limbang). The total number of attendees to the six forums or dialogue sessions were one hundred and forty attendees. An average of about 23 people per session. I was able to carry out interviews with eight elders from the two villages.

The early 1960s saw 80% (Lian, 2003; Saging & Bulan 2003; Talla, 1979) of Orang Ulu (people of the interior, which the Kelabit are grouped into), the Kelabit people, mostly residing in rural areas and villages, where exposure to the outside world was minimal. Children were raised predominantly in their mother tongue. In some villages there existed some rudimentary primary schools, but Kelabit remained the language spoken outside of school activities. But the middle of the 1970s saw a massive migratory trend of rural people moving to the urban centres pursuing higher education, government employments, and other urban attractions. Regarding the two villages, logging roads were built in the early 1980s connecting them to the towns. As a result, the generation of Kelabit people below the age of 60 years old, who grew up in the urban areas, are predominantly multilingual. Our recent survey also shows that participants above the age group 60, are fluent speakers of Kelabit despite living away from their communities. It points to the fact that before these groups abandoned rural life, as children they had the privilege of being raised predominantly in their mother tongue. A critical period of language acquisition as claimed by Bongaerts (2005). Yet, within the diaspora group, only 25% of participants would

continue to speak daily in the language, and a mere 15 % continue to speak the language at home with their children. There are many factors that may influence those above 60 years old speakers to not use their language as often as they could, such as having no one to speak to, pressure in using dominant languages, and language use choice due to mixed marriages etc. We can call this group of speakers ‘sleeping generation,’ since they will be able to revive their speech easily.

The survey did not specify the degree of proficiency in the language, but was indicated by a simple category, whether they speak the language a little, moderately, or fluently. There were also no criteria to define the different level of language proficiency. For example, using Linkert numbers for level of fluency or proficiency as a native speaker would have been useful. So, what does fluency mean?

According to Collins English dictionary (n.d), a fluent speaker of “a particular language can speak the language easily and correctly,” or is someone who knows how to communicate confidently and effortlessly in a language. It is safe to say that Kelabit people above the age of 60 years old are mostly fluent in Kelabit, being raised in their mother tongue before most of them emigrated to the urban settings (See Table. 4).

Defining the health of the language?

Survey questions were asked in such a way to solicit participants ideas and responses to each research questions about the status and health of the Kelabit language. The type of question asked were: what language do they speak daily as individual, with whom do they speak it with, either with their families, at home or at workplace, and who else do they interact with in the language? Such questions reflect the vitality of the language, or how robust and healthy the language use is within the community. Language choice reflects the attitude, either positively or otherwise, towards one’s language, and the kind of priority given to using one’s ancestral (someone’s first language or L1) language over others.

The health of a language is a metaphor for how active its usage is within the speech community. In other words, the term is popularly substituted with language vitality, where we want to know if the language is actively used or not, whether the language is used in an increasing number of communicative domains, or actively being passed on to future generation.

In assessing language health or its vitality we must consider several factors. According to UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003), these are factors such as language transmission, how many speakers are active, the number of speakers within the total population, is the language being increasingly used in different or new domains and media, and do we have materials for language education and literacy. The type of responses we have to these questions, whether positive or negative, reflects the health and vitality of our language (Lewis & Simons, 2010).

The age category 50-79 years old (See Table 4), has the highest score in fluency, while eight Elders (who inherited Kelabit from the ancestors) as L1 is in this same category of fluency as those in the category above. Since the elders represent a small number of participants, and have only one category, being fluent, I included their survey result in the 50-79 age category.

Survey information or data represents the attitude of the participants to the language. Despite the current reality of Kelabit being used less among the diaspora communities, and how they use the language, 90 percent of them agree with the notion that Kelabit should continue to be spoken as a language into the future.

Research has also shown language as a social determinant of health (Federici, 2022; McIvor, et al., 2009; Showstack, et al., 2019), particularly in minority groups and among certain social classes of society. For an Indigenous person, it means knowing one's "language has a vital role in the mental, physical and emotional health" of its speaker. Because language connects us to our "culture, history, spirituality and land...the foundations of personal and community wellness." (FPCC, p. 2). On the other hand, speaking only one's ancestral language may not determine a better health outcome. Take for example, in a multilingual society, when an Indigenous person accesses health care services, she or he will lose out when health care providers do not speak the same language and are unable to communicate clearly the health issues with the patient. Since healthcare providers are often non-Indigenous, their language often is not compatible or fully understood by the patient. In Sarawak, most patients from the interior when visiting a clinic are often accompanied by relatives to act as translator. For instance, among a certain group of interior Penans¹⁰ in Sarawak, there is a distrust of health care professionals as there have been many 'unexplained' death of community members after visiting local clinics and

¹⁰ Penan are the last hunter gatherer nomads in Borneo, where only a few families are not yet settled. They often share the same forest areas with the settled Indigenous groups.

hospitals. They attributed this, among other things, to urban prejudice and their opposition to logging activities in their territories and refuse to bring their sick for treatments. This is an extreme case of communication breakdown between two unrelated languages: a critical health outcome for the Indigenous community.

In summary, my research methodology was based on mixed-methods, with quantitative and qualitative methods combined with Indigenous methodologies. Where Indigenous ways of knowing often challenge the Euro-western methodologies leading to a new method informed by Indigenous world views. There were three methods used in collecting our data, using survey, in-person interview, and forum, which was conducted as a focus group method. The research process went smoothly where consent was obtained from leaders to engage with the community. Prior to conducting the survey, I was in the two village communities for three weeks participating in several cultural ceremonies and a Christmas celebration. As Wilson (2009) says being relational is central to the Indigenous ways of doing things. It is important to note that, research has shown that knowing one's Indigenous language can determine a better health outcome for Indigenous peoples. In general, the survey data was able to answer the research question regarding our language status and health, and now we can move forward in taking the appropriate actions with respect to our research findings.

Chapter 5. Research Findings

To answer my research question, I first present results of the language survey that relate to the language status followed by those that relate to the language health (for an overview of the descriptive results see Appendix E).

Results that relate to status

With respect to language status, I consider this to be a complex phenomenon made up of “people's attitudes toward the home country of the language, people's attitudes towards speakers of that language, and institutional attitudes about the language.” (..). In other words, the perceived image attached to a certain language could determine the status of a language in the

society. For us, it is a choice in using Kelabit instead of a dominant language and between Kelabit individuals in various social settings. It could mean to intentionally use Kelabit when using social media (e.g. the use of internet apps, Instagram, or email), in phone conversation, during ceremonies, public meetings, and religious activities.

The survey included four questions that relate specifically to status, connected to current speakers' attitude to their language, an important indicator of the status of a language. As carriers of the language, they are expected to pass it on to the next generations. Our data shows that, participants' response to the language future is positively high with 87.6% (see Table 2) out of the 100 people whose response was complete. Thus, despite living with constant pressures from the authorities to conform to the National Language policy favoring Malay, the dominant languages in education and employment (Malay, Chinese, and English), there remains a strong sense of pride in one's language, culture and definitely a strong sense of identity as a Kelabit. Notably, while being one of the smallest groups in Malaysia (0.03% of total population), Kelabit society currently has favourable image in the national perception due to the favorable weather and beautiful geographical location of villages in the Kelabit Highlands. There also have been numerous Kelabit individuals elevated to higher positions in politics, public ministries, the corporate world and businesses, that have been exemplar in their fields. Finally, having the first national rural satellite internet installed in Bario, in 1990, the eBario, has led to a favorable public view on Kelabits as progressive. This influences the Kelabit socio-political perception of itself, which unfortunately does not necessarily translate into the domain of language prestige.

Below, I will present the participants' responses to question in relation to language status.

Table 1. Attitude to the future of the Kelabit language, whether it will last or not

Variables	Total %	Remarks
Still in use	53.6	-
Yes & dependent on revitalization efforts by community	34 (53.6+34) = 87.6	v. positive
Doubtful/Don't know	4	unsure
Loss	8	negative
Important to use daily	96%	v. positive

The Table.1 above shows 96% do agree that a critical factor in maintaining the life or vitality of the language is to speak it or use it on a daily basis. Prioritizing the use of the language ensures that it is maintained and sustained. The data above showing an optimistic attitude to language status, is supported by a high percentage point who think positively about the future of the language (see Table 2).

When I speak to the grandchildren, they have a blank look on their face, since they do not understand me. It's such a pity! And when they too speak to me, I feel dumb, because we have no common language to communicate. – Riong Asil (Tameh Libal)

Buri' keh anak mupun arih temo' tideh na'em keli' enun nuk belan arih; riruh-riruh. I'an ada'! Peburi' kerideh penneh, ari peh, temo' tarih. Na'em men arih kereb peburi' ngedeh, ta'un mupun.

Table 2. Future of the Kelabit language by age groupings

Participants have a choice of four answers which they can either select one or more.

Age groups	Yes	Unsure-unless active transmission	Loss	Don't know
16-29	4	8	1	2
30-49	14	14	3	1
50-79	28	20	6	3
80 & above	4	0	0	0
Total	49	42	10	6

Table.2, above shows a breakdown in age groups' attitude to the future of our language. Below, I present the results and discuss at length the future of the language according to age groups. This data is important as we want to know which age group presents attitudes that are positive or doubtful regarding the language future. In this way, our future programs and strategies can target each group accordingly. I had to exclude the age group below 15 years old for reasons I discussed in the section on p.54. In the same section, I briefly discuss the critical role that gender plays during our survey and in Indigenous language transmission in general.

Age group 16-29 years old

This is the youngest age group to take part in our survey. Compared to other age groups, they are the least able to speak the language. Most who can speak are at the learning stage (See Table. 4). The majority of this age group is unsure that the language will continue into the future. They believe that it depends on how much effort the community will put into teaching, maintaining, and sustaining the language. They also argue that the young people need reasons to take pride in their heritage. Wishing that their parents make time and efforts to teach them their *adet*, culture, and *karuh*, language. Yet, they do not believe that the language will be totally lost.

These young adults are generally multilingual, born to parents who have established themselves in the urban areas between the 1980s and 1990s. Their families are already established in the urban towns with the likelihood that they have purchased themselves a home away from the village. However, when combined with the number of ‘yes’ responses (4), it shows that this age group has maintained a positive outlook on the future of the language.

This group can be considered “the Tipping Point Generation”, because they will make or break the continuity of the language transmission for the future. When young people do not speak the language of their ancestors, a whole generation will be deprived. Many of them were raised by parents who reside in the urban settings. Moreover, some of these urban young adults will likely move out of their parent’s home in their mid-teens to pursue higher education and training elsewhere. Therefore, they are twice removed from ever using their language. Baseline anthropological research in PNG found that, “if children are not learning the language from their parents, there is no guarantee that the language will be pass on to the next generation.” (Kulick, 2019, p. 26). Another study by Fishman (1991), identified factors in society where language is used, called ‘domain’, or function. Domain is the ways that we interact with language such as speaking and listening, reading and writing, including the use of digital media. When the domain of language use erodes, language shift begins. In other words, for a language to remain healthy and alive it must continue to have a function in the life of the speech community.

Age group 30-49 years old

There are more speakers of the Kelabit language in this age group compared to the previous one. A higher percentage of the speakers are as beginner (46%), followed by

intermediate (23%), only a few consider themselves fluent (15%), (See Table. 4). This is an interesting age group who are born between 1974-1993, living on the cusp of a transition in the community. I call them the “Borderline generation.” In 1970, logging activities and roads were entering into the traditional territory splitting our community into anti-loggers and supporters. There was a big movement against the encroachment, eventually many villagers were temporarily employed as labourers in the industry. Young people started to move away from the village into the nearest urban towns (Medamit, Limbang, Marudi, Miri and beyond), some to pursue their studies in secondary school and higher, others to find low level government and company jobs, menial jobs including as domestic worker (amah) and child-minder where older siblings who earlier have set out to study now have employment and able to host their younger siblings. Likewise, younger siblings are encouraged to come down and attend secondary school or college in major towns with the idea that the educational facilities and quality in bigger towns are better. Consequently, when older parents are left alone in the village, they too are called to the towns as caregivers for grandchildren while their children are working full-time. For the elderly parents, it can mean being able to access better health facilities for their on-going healthcare, like clinics and hospitals.

In one of the villages, a group of families and relatives moved out in the early 1970s to a settlement near the town to be closer to their schooling age children. So, this groups of children while exposed to some urban settings, were able to continue to speak in their mother tongue until they were boarded into town at secondary school. Some of these young adults are then the product of this generation, which I consider as the ‘conflicted generation’ in terms of their attitude to their mother tongue. This angst is reflected in their response to this question regarding the future of the Kelabit language. While they do generally agree that the language will last (14%), at the same time, they are unsure if it will (14%), if there are no current efforts by the community to maintain and sustain the language into the future. Several participants say they do speak Kelabit at home, and wished they had more support and encouragement from their parents and the older generation to practise speaking in the language. And a few acknowledge the declining use of the language and uncertainty about what the future will be, while a small number think it will be lost. Again, despite the few in this group (see Table 2) who speak only Kelabit daily, they have a strong desire for their culture, identity and language to continue.

Those of my grandchildren who live in the village, I can speak to them, and they listen. Some others, when you talk to them, they look at you with a blank look. Our lives are now getting further and further apart, we hardly meet and opportunities to talk in our language then suffers. We the adults are responsible for taking care of our ancestral language. If we care less about passing it on, one day it will disappear and that will be the end of it. – Pun Mileh Ayu' (Jangin Ta'ih Bilung)

Do' di kaih mupun bi' tudo dih kampung ibal deh, peburi teh narih ngedeh, kereb tideh ninger. Ken teh ibal, burer teh match deh renga' arih peburi' ngedeh. Iyuk-iyuk petad ulun tauh nekinih, jarang tauh petulu, pegayam lem kburi' tauh. Tauh lemerar nih patut nu'uh buri' tepun tauh nih. Na'em tauh ngingul buri' tauh mé riak neh, putut buet neh peped neh.

Age group 50-79 years old

Most of the participants in this group are fluent speakers at 68%, followed by the intermediate at 14% and beginner at 12% (Table. 4). This is a very optimistic age group regarding the future of the language, where (34%, Table.4) says the language will remain viable into the future. These are what I call the “Enabling generation” since they comprise the biggest population of fluent speakers of the language. And they are our most valuable resources to potentially participate in the task of maintaining and sustaining the language. As fluent speakers, they can assist in promoting and teaching the language to the younger generation especially in the immersive programs. These immersive programs, such as Master Apprentice and Language nest, have proven to be very successful with pioneering Indigenous language revitalization works among the Maori, Hawaiian, Sámi, and the Canadian and North American Indigenous Nations.

Despite their optimistic stance, they caution against being indifferent to the endangerment facing the language. Instead, they want to actively create initiatives to use the language as often as possible in their daily lives. Without much practise, the language can lose its importance within the community. Currently, we are observing fewer and fewer people using the language even among the intermediate and fluent speakers.

Yet a some of them (see Table. 2) still express fear that we can lose it (6%) especially when parents stop speaking or using the language themselves, much less when they are not

intentionally passing it on to their offspring. According to Kulick (2019), when a significant number of speakers do not use the language, its demise can be very rapid. Especially since the next generation will not have the capacity to pass it on anymore. Some view that mixed marriages are a detrimental factor to the language future as more young people are living in the urban areas socializing with different groups. This is evident in the urban church settings where a diversified mix of ethnicities make up its members, where Bahasa Malay or English is predominantly used in religious observances.

Whenever we marry other races, we tend to 'lose' to them and start speaking their languages instead of ours. As for me, I have lived most of my life in the urban settings, even overseas in Australia, but I never forget our language. Should our children be taught our language from young, I am sure they wouldn't forget it. - Simun Ngerapu (Mawan Ayu')

Perapu tauh ngen lun beken keleh, kaleh neh tauh ela' karuh ideh. Kayu' narih, tu'uh peh tuda'-tuda' lak mudeng ngi bawang la'ud, mé bawang mado Australia, na'em teh narih kelupan. Tulu teh den keh, tauh ngajar karuh tauh ngedeh kema' deh dari, a'em teh mayu deh kelupan dih riak."

Age group 80 years and above

This age group is certainly the most optimistic for they all believe that the language will continue as they have always witnessed it being passed on to them from time immemorial. For it is the only language they understand and lived with in exercising their everyday lives, expressing rituals, ceremonies and *adet* (cultural norms). Although they are now witnessing, that they too have difficulty in communicating with their grandchildren, yet they remain optimistic, and they cannot perceive its demise (see Table 2). Unfortunately, the community is fast losing our Elders, leaving my generation (age group between 50-79 years), as the custodian and proponent of our Kelabit language into the future.

Another question related to status is around domains and events where Kelabit is spoken (See below Table 3). This question makes queries about participants' choice of language use in social events, an expression of language vitality in the community. The survey revealed that

majority of the participants use Kelabit in their homes at 83%, followed by 81% using it during feasts, compared to the least of their usage, at 19% in their workplace.

Table 3. Location and events where Kelabit language is spoken

	Home only	Soc. gathering	Feast (<i>irau</i>)	Workplace	Church
In the village	42	4	38	14	31
In the urban	41	6	43	5	20
Total	83	37	81	19	51

In analysing these responses, it seems there may have been a lack of clarity in the question asked, which could have been confusing for the participants. The question prior to this is, what language your family speak daily, where there are three choices of languages, Kelabit, Malay, and English. The following question is, where do you speak it. The data seems to reflect a very high number of participants using Kelabit at home, which probably is not the case (See Table 3). Firstly, I would argue that not a very high number of participants would use Kelabit at home either in the villages or in the urban areas (See Table 4, *Daily family language use at home according to geographical location*). This begs the question, was the meaning clear when asking, if Kelabit was only their daily language, or did they perceived it also to mean the language they claimed to use every day other than Kelabit? Secondly, there is no Kelabit-only-speaking church in the urban settings, but the data shows 20 people are using the language in the urban church.

Finally, the other question relevant to status is ‘should Kelabit be spoken daily?’ shows an interesting data, where 96% of participants believe that the language must be spoken daily for it to last (see Table 1). Regardless of some people not speaking the language or speaking it a little, there is an overwhelming desire to see that the language continue. It reflects on the participant’s strong sense of belonging or connection to the community, to the bigger idea of what it means to be a Kelabit. As reported in UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003), “language is a positive asset reaffirming identity... a unifying symbol for the cultural community” (p.12).

However, like many minority groups, Indigenous communities globally are increasingly abandoning their language in favour of another. This is often because they perceive that it has no future prospect in the modern world, thinking it is backward and impractical. In our context, this

is related to the challenges we face socially, economically and politically, such as the Malaysian national language policy that favour the dominant languages in education and employment.

The problem is that parents aren't speaking Kelabit to their children, so how will they ever learn. Instead, they speak Malay at home, which they do not have to, because kids are using it at school anyway. In fact, our leaders should be our model to speak confidently in our language when giving speeches at social gatherings, during feasts, and during our religious meetings. - Pun Liat Desur (Naomi Kuta).

Lun merar suk na'em pekaruh ngen anak deh, kapeh nideh mileh. Na'em buri' Melayu' peh narih ngi ruma' mimang belajar ineh ayu' teh anakadi' ngi sekuleh. Setu'uh neh bi' leh, lun rayeh nuk nguyut tauh nih teh pengitap bi', mesti kerideh pekaruh lem karuh tauh ngan semanget, kayu' renga' tauh kuman peruyung, lem irau-irau, mé lem siding, kineh.

During the language forum participants spoke about the importance of teaching the language systematically and to seek out those who want to learn it. Speakers shared about the need to be vigilant and intentional in our purpose to use the language at every opportunity. This means, the community and leadership should have a systematic strategy in creating a platform, a structure for teaching and programs to take place. According to Hinton (2001), this is a priority for our community members, "who must also be trained to teach" our language (p. 350), because we lacked trained teachers. It also means that products and teaching materials need to be produced, such as children's books, workbooks, teaching methods and strategies; teachers training, training in immersions strategies, both traditional and from known models (UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). To keep revitalization works in view involving the wider community, hosting an annual workshop on teaching the language is necessary. The *Sekuleh Pelayan* (Mission Field School), was such a model, an annual reading and reading classes organized by the missionaries in the past to teach our illiterate parents. Most survey participants believe that, if the community is taking active measures in promoting the language, there is a definite hope for the language continuing.

Accordingly, as the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003) observed, "In the end, it is the speakers, not outsiders, who maintain or abandon languages." (p.4). This is one reason why positive encouragement of community speakers is necessary,

where like-minded language activists can work together in initiating strategies and programs to sustain and revitalize our language.

Results that relate to health

The health of a language is a metaphor for how robust its usage is within the speech community, and its usefulness. In other words, the term is popularly substituted with language vitality, where we want to know if the language is actively used or not, whether the language is used in an increasing number of communicative domains, or actively being passed on to future generations. In assessing language health or its vitality we must consider several factors.

According to UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003), these are issues such as language transmission, how many speakers are active, the number of speakers within the total population, if the language is being increasingly used in different or new domains and media and are there materials for language education and literacy. The type of responses to these questions, whether positive or negative, reflects the health and vitality of our language. (Lewis & Simons, 2010, p. 4). In addition, research reveals that the number of speakers alone is a poor measurement of the health of a language; “rather, what is most important is intergenerational transmission, especially how many children are learning the language” (Barreña et al. 2007; Fishman, 1991; Norris, 2004).

From the survey data, the age category 50-79 years old has the highest score in fluency. This includes the eight Elders, as L1 speakers, whose fluency is undeniable. The Elders are masters of the Kelabit language for they are the last monolingual generation of Kelabit speakers. See the following Table.4.

Another description for health of a language can also be reference from the participant’s responses to the question where and with whom they use the language on a daily basis (Table.1).

Table 4. Kelabit language fluency according to age groupings

Age	Fluent/ Advanced	Good speaker/ Intermediate	Speak a little/ Beginner	Non-speaker
16-29 (13)	2 (2%)	3 (3.1%)	6 (6%)	2 (2%)
30-49 (30)	3 (3.1%)	9 (9.2%)	16 (16.5)	2 (2%)
50-79 (50)	34 (35%)	7 (7%)	6 (6%)	3 (3.1)

80-above (4)	4 (4%)	0	0	0
Total (97)	43	19	28	7

Results on language fluency according to age (Table. 4) presents a favourable outlook on the Kelabit language. It shows that 60.6% of the participants are speakers of the language. This figure combines both the 40.4% of fluent speakers, and the 20.2%. of good or intermediate speakers. The reason for combining the two fields is to “create a more just and inclusive *domain*, without attempting to marginalize a certain population of speakers,” the intermediate group (Cheng et al., 2021). Notably, I did not define in the survey question what a fluent speaker meant, which could lead to some errors. I noticed that some participants I regard as fluent speakers underestimated their ability and instead crossed the intermediate box. This is corroborated by research on the Mohawk by Hill (2015, p. 49) “where...assessment indicates that most second language speakers rate themselves low when self-assessing.”

I have defined briefly the meaning of a fluent speaker on page 28 according to Collins English dictionary (n.d.), as someone who can speak the language easily and correctly, or as someone who knows how to communicate freely by putting phrases and sentences in a coherent manner.

The data from Table. 4 shows that Kelabit people above the age of 60 years old are mostly fluent in Kelabit, being raised in their mother tongue before they emigrated to the urban areas. This is not surprising since they would have grown up in the village until their early teens, speaking and interacting predominantly in their ancestral language with their parents, siblings and peers. Except when they were in classes, where the medium of teaching in primary school at that time would have been English.

Until the 1960s, the Kelabit people mostly resided in villages in the remote interiors, and their exposure to the outside world was minimal (Saging & Bulan, 1989), and children were raised only in their ancestral language. In some villages there existed some rudimentary primary schools, but Kelabit remained the only language spoken. By the middle of 1970s, there was a massive migratory trend of rural young people moving to the urban centres to pursue higher education, government employments, and other urban attractions (see age group 30-49 years old, p. 32). Thus, the generation of Kelabit people below the age of 50 years old, who now reside in the urban, are predominantly multilingual.

Our survey points to the fact that before these groups abandoned rural life, as children, they had the privilege of being raised only in their mother tongue. As young children growing up speaking in their own language, this is a critical period of language acquisition called the Critical Period Hypothesis (Bongaerts, 2005). They benefitted from full immersion within the community of native speakers and among peers until their early teens. Upon attaining this age all the youngsters had to leave the village to study at secondary schools in the towns. Even in the towns, they may still be exposed to the language as they would likely socialize with their own peers, seeking the same social circles of relatives, and together attending weekly religious activities.

The survey specified the degree of proficiency in the language in terms of whether they spoke the language a little, moderately, or fluently. There were no further criteria to define the different level of language proficiency. In the future it would be useful to test the speakers on their proficiency level, for the purpose of measuring how effectively a language user can perform different types of language tasks. Proficiency in a language can be generally categorize as: a beginner, intermediate, advanced, or mastery. Mastery in fluency means that the speaker has a native-like fluency with nuanced language comprehension and usage, communicate effectively in the target language.¹¹ No doubt the Elders are considered masters of the language as Kelabit is the only language they know.

Table 5. Daily family language use according to age groupings

Age	Kelabit only	Kelabit with others	Others only (BM/Eng/Indigenous)
16-29	0	7	8
30-49	5	11	14
50-79	24	17	10
80-above	4	0	0
Total	33	35	32
Descriptive table	33%	35%	32%

¹¹ See <https://www.languagetesting.com/proficiency-scales>

As shown in Table.5, the age group between 50-79 has the highest percentage of group speaking Kelabit at 24%, while 17% of participants speaks a mix of Kelabit with other languages. When these two total figures are combined (33%+35%) the result shows a 68% of participants are speaking Kelabit, or at least a mix of Kelabit with other languages. It is an encouraging number compared to 32% who do not use Kelabit at all in their family interactions. It shows that Kelabit is still a viable language with the participants, and it is clear to us that our language efforts should focus on enabling learners to speak Kelabit daily.

Table 6. Language use in families among singles and married

	Kelabit only	Kelabit with other	Others only
Married	23	24	18
Single	5	7.5	14
Total	28	31.5	32
Percentage	31%	34%	35%

Table.6, shows that married participants have a higher percentage of using Kelabit within their families at 23%. While using Kelabit with a mix of other languages at 24%. In total, these two figures come to 47% (23+24), which is quite high compared to 18% who do not use Kelabit at all. It could mean that most Kelabit families are married within their own kind or that Kelabit sometimes become a language of choice in the homes of some mixed-marriage couples.

Does this data reflect the challenge of mixed-marriages affecting language use? Britannica dictionary defined mixed-marriages as “marriage between two people of different races or religions.” In this case between a Kelabit spouse and another of a different ethnic group or religion. Among other things, participants believe mixed-marriages are one of the key reasons contributing to declining use of the Kelabit language. It is understood that mixed couples must choose a family language at home, often it is not the minority language. However, some parents are intentionally speaking in dominant languages to their children with the idea to get them ahead in school and in their future employment.

Where Kelabit is not spoken at home, a dominant language common to the couple is used.

Table 7. Daily family language use at home according to geographical location

	Total	Lg Napir	Lg Seridan	Urban
Kelabit only	33*	7 (21%)	19 (58%)	7 (21%)
Kelabit with English & B. Malay	37*	4 (11%)	5 (13%)	28 (76%)
Kelabit & Other language (Iban, Chinese, Kayan)	10* 80% (total)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	6 (60%)
B. Malay only	3	0	0	3
English only	13	0	0	13
English & B.Malay	4	0	0	4
Grand Total	100			

The above data in Table 7, shows that a total of 80% of families speak Kelabit or a mix of Kelabit with other languages (e.g. BM, Iban, English, Kayan, and Chinese) at home. The village of Lg Seridan has the highest number of participants speaking only Kelabit at home (58%), followed by Lg Napir (21%). Perhaps, this is not surprising since Lg Seridan has a higher village population in comparison. At the same times Lg Seridan is more isolated, reachable by small aeroplane (otherwise a 6-hour drive on dirt roads), while Lg Napir can be reached in 3 hours on logging roads from Limbang town. Perhaps, its proximity to the urban areas has an impact on the higher percentage of people speaking other languages at home in Lg Napir (41%) compared to its population ratio with Lg Seridan (23%). It is observed that in Lg Napir more young people are married into different language groups, where parents and children speak a mix of Kelabit with other languages.

As predicted, the villages (Lg Seridan & Lg Napir) maintain exclusivity as the Kelabit language centre at 79% (21%+58%), whereas in the urban, only 21% of participants are speaking Kelabit only. In these villages, Kelabit has been spoken naturally and has been sustained and transmitted traditionally. But it is encouraging to see that the urban setting shares the same number of family speakers, speaking only in Kelabit. As assumed, the urban areas have a disproportionate percentage of people speaking other languages with Kelabit (28%). Most of this

is in English as opposed to BM, the national language. Not all is lost, as Kelabit is thus retained as language of the family.

Yet, within the diaspora group, only 25% of participants continue to speak daily in the language, and 21% continue to speak Kelabit at home with their children. There are many factors that may influence those above 60 years old speakers to not use their language, such as not having anyone else to speak to, or having the socio-economic pressures in using dominant languages, and maybe due to mixed marriages. We can refer to this group of speakers as the ‘dormant’ or ‘sleeping generation,’ where they need motivation and opportunities to ‘wake up’ the language in them.

Table 8. Daily individual language use by age groupings

Age	Kelabit only	Kelabit & others BM/English	Other language only (Iban,Chinese,Kayan)
15-29	2	4	9
30-49	3	2	17
50-79	24	18	9
80-above	3	0	0
Total in %	35.1%	26.4%	38.5%

From the above Table. 8, individual participants seem to use more other languages than Kelabit in their daily speech repertoire at 38.5%. However, when adding the two figures where Kelabit is used even in conjunction with BM or English, the above figures show a high percentage $(35.1\% + 26.4\%) = 61.5\%$. When this figure compares with family language use in Table 7, at 80%, this is because Kelabit was also used with the whole array of other languages such as Iban, Chinese, Kayan, English and Malay etc. Again, our data seems to prove that Kelabit is commonly used within the community, yet at the same time, it is declining. A testament to the “definitely endangered” nature of our current language situation as indicated by UNESCO Vitality Index (2003).

Table 9. Daily individual language use, in term of frequency and according to location

	Frequency of use	Total	Lung Napir	Lung Seridan	Urban
1.Kelabit only	24%	29 (24%)	4	20	5
2.Kelabit/Eng/BM	29%	36 (29%)	6	8	22
3.Kelabit & others (Iban, Chinese, Kayan)	(24+29+10) = 63%	12 (10%)	3	2	7
4.BM only	15%	18 (15%)	0	0	6
5.Eng only	11%	14 (11%)	1	1	10
6.Eng & BM	11%	13 (11%)	0	0	10

According to the above Table 9, 63% of individual participants speak some Kelabit every day. This percentage comes from adding the first three variables [1. (24%), 2. (29%), and 3. (10%)], where Kelabit is part of the daily language, including being spoken together with some others. This data corroborates that of the family daily language use. It also shows that a higher number of Kelabit are multilingual in languages such as Bahasa Malaysia (BM), English, and some other local Indigenous languages.

How does this data reflect the participants' perception that mixed-marriages is one of the factors affecting language use. Or does it? From our data above, it is difficult to argue that the figures on English use only at 11%, and BM use at 15%, are determinant of a mix-marriage. It could be due to several other factors, such as parents being intentional in speaking dominant languages with their children (English/BM), with the idea to get them ahead with the dominant languages used in school and employment.

Table 10. To whom do you speak Kelabit language with?

Variables	Yes	No	Total participants	Remarks
With grandparents	71	29	100	100%
Kelabit parents with children	28 (39%)	43 (61%)	71	excl. singles

(Table.10) This is the smallest of the Tables in this survey, with only two variables, yet it reveals the most important information regarding the current trend and future of the Kelabit language. Looking at the first variable, what is striking in this data is that it shows a very high number of people do speak to their grandparents in Kelabit. This is indicative of grandparents being accessible, and being monolingual (L1), whereby even beginners must communicate with their grandparents in Kelabit.

Traditionally, grandparents are also regarded as an important agent in transmitting ancestral language to the grandchildren. I have witnessed several young children, such as Laura, Robin, and others, who were brought up with their grandparents where their proficiency in Kelabit is high compared to their peers. In the past, this situation was common in the longhouse where parents often must work in the farm from dawn till dusk, and children were left in the care of their grandparents. Since grandparents were spared doing hard labour in the fields, they were tasked with minding the house unit and the children during the day or working in the multi-cultivar garden near the longhouse. The few elders and grandparents we currently have are the last generation who never went to school, where oral language transmission has always been the ancestral tradition.

Equally striking is the second variable, “Kelabit parents and their children,” which indicate that many parents are not speaking Kelabit to their children. In other words, they are not passing on the language to the next generation. There are a total of 71 participating parents in this survey where 61% of them do not speak to their children in Kelabit. This is a critical data set because here, we can extrapolate the degree of Kelabit language endangerment, as shown in the UNESCO’s Vitality Index, the Fishman GIDS (Kelabit is between level 6 and 7)¹², and verticalization theory.

According to these figures, for whatever reason, Kelabit parents do not seem eager to pass on the language, nor are most of them concerned that it might one day disappear. This finding suggests that conducting an intergenerational language camps could play a role in creating a learning environment, where grandparents, parents, other adults, and peers alike are present

¹² GIDS Stage 6: The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language. GIDS Stage 7: The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it with their elders but is not transmitting it to their children

together. The principal work we must begin with is to raise our community’s awareness on the status of our language endangerment. Although our forums have identified several concerned members who can rally the community and mobilize our resources for revitalization. It is not enough the whole community must be accountable to this situation. After all, it is the community agency that can reverse this situation, no outside forces can mobilize us to find durable solutions. To reiterate UNESCO’s Ad hoc Expert Group statement in 2003, “In the end, it is the speakers, not outsiders, who maintain or abandon languages.” (2003, p. 4).

Although the survey data reveals that Kelabit language is declining in use among the diaspora communities, 90% of them agree that Kelabit should continue to be spoken into the future (see Table. 9). If the perceived image of the language is positive, why do people not speak it often? Why do they speak other languages? Again, this is a complex individual’s psychology which probably has a lot to do with issues of perception, cultural identity, education, employment, socio-political life, neighborhood, context, emigration, and life experiences.

In summary the survey data is an attempt to articulate the problem of language shift for the Kelabit (Pauwels, 2004, as cited in Brown & Salmons, 2022, p. 2), but it also indicates to us the possibility of revitalizing it, and the opportunity to maintain what we already have, despite our current situation. Below, I attempt to estimate the total population of the two communities.

Table 11. Estimated population of Kelabit Meri’it and Seridan as of January 2023

Residence	Est. Total population	Actual (no records)	Total Survey Participants	Village participants	Urban participants
Fa’ Meri’it (Lg. Datu, Lg Beti’, Tubai, & Punut)	420	0	119	22	97
Seridan (Lg. Bedian)	1,150	0	25	14	11
Other places in Sarawak	550	0	3		3
Overseas incl. Peninsula	32	0	10		10
Total	2,152	0	157	36	121

At the time of our language survey, there is no official data on the overall population from both communities. I was told there has been no official census carried out in these villages over the decade, and even if there was, I do not have current access to the official numbers. The village's churches have a membership list, but Table. 11, does not include those who are living in the urban centers. The population figures recorded here are only estimates given by various leaders in the community. Perhaps, one reason for the lack of official interest in conducting census in the interior is the small number of populations that can affect political change.

In terms of the numbers for the survey participants, these are calculated from the question forms completed. Whereas the incomplete ones were archived. Based on these estimated population figures, the percentage of survey participants to the estimated total population of Kelabit in both communities is 7.3% ($157/2,152 \times 100$). This is a fair sample size representative of the population. Overall, the language survey achieves a response rate of 36% ($108/300 \times 100\%$), a very high success rate in term of the open and online surveys.

In summary, this is an important chapter, where our research findings on the status and health of the Kelabit language is revealed. Results that relate to the status of a language is the measurement of participants' attitude toward their language and its future, including how others view the speakers and their locality. Our survey indicated that a high percentage of participant's agree that it is important to maintain the use of the language daily, indicating their sense of pride and identity as Kelabit (See Table.1, 2, & 3). But this positive attitude is also fraught with doubts and anxieties about its future unless mitigating factors are embraced by the speech community.

The health of the Kelabit language is measured by how active and useful the language is within the speech community. In assessing language health several factors are for consideration, among these is intergenerational transmission. Our survey shows that 61% of families do not speak Kelabit to their children. This is a critical finding since we can now identify where the language vulnerability lies. It also reaffirms the 'definitely endangered' nature of our language as promulgated by theories and measurement indexes in the literature review (See Table. 4 to 10).

An in-depth analysis of the four age-group responses to the survey questions was dealt with. The first age group I called them the 'Tipping Point' generation since they are the generation that will either pass on the language to future generation or not. The survey shows that they are the least able to speak Kelabit. The older age group are the 'Enabling Generation'

they are mostly fluent speakers, since they are our valuable assets in maintaining and sustaining the Kelabit language. The middle age group are the ‘Borderline Generation’ or “conflicted generation.” Some of these age groups do speak Kelabit, yet they are unsure if the language will last, unless measures by the community to revitalize the language are actively put in place. While the Elders find it difficult to comprehend how a language can sleep despite their inability to communicate properly with their grandchildren.

It is common that many of our younger generation who live in the urban centres have mix-marriages due to the social milieu they are in. But our culture, we shouldn't forget that. According to the old people, our language is known to the spirits, where they communicate with the spirit through teteng, such as when they call for the eagles and the sunbirds to guide their decisions. Now we pray, each race uttering their own languages, that is why we also say that even the Creator understands our language. So, it is imperative for us to not lose it, because we were each given a sacred language.”
– former Pengulo’, Tulu Ayu’ (Usup Raja).

Mimang mula’ lun tauh nuk puli’ ngen pupuh beken, kadi’ deh tudo ngi la’ud nangé. Tu’uh peh kinéh, adet nih suk na’em kereb tu’en tauh kelupan; karuh nih ken buri’ lun merar nilad, keli’ ada’ tidih-renga’ deh ‘neteng’ kenui ngan ngaé’ nilad. Nekinih keleh sebayang tauh, karuh lem bangsa’ sidih-sidih teh tauh, kapeh neh tauh am mala Tuhan peh keli’ neh teh karuh abi tauh nih. Kapeh neh tauh kereb nesan dih: nuk biré Ieh tidih ngan abi-abi pupuh lun tana’ inih.

Chapter 6. Discussion

Significance of the Research

The significance of my research survey is that it provides my community with concrete data on the status and health of our language, enabling us to find appropriate means to maintain and revive our language. My study indicates that despite the precariousness of the Kelabit language at present, there is a positive expectation for its future. And community awareness can now play an important role in drawing in concerned speakers to become active participants in future language works.

Our language survey indicates clearly that while the level of language endangerment is worrisome, the speech community's emotional attachment to our language and knowledge system is strong. In our case, 96% of Kelabit believe the language will last and 80% of the community believe that the language should be spoken on a daily basis, yet 40% of the participants do not speak the language. I attribute this important finding to the participants making a strong association of the language to their Indigenous identity.

My data was also able to demonstrate that the intergenerational language transmission among the two villages was more prevalent than among the diaspora groups. Indeed, Kelabit villages are where social structures for the language are strongest. Since the 'horizontal structures' are strongly maintained as theorized by Salmons' on verticalization (Brown & Salmons, 2021). Here, too, is where the mother tongue is spoken in an inter-generational manner. When young children grow up in an immersible environment during their critical period of language acquisition (Bongaerts, 2005), their language comprehension is optimal. This calls for a robust need to protect the language at these critical sites, the villages. It is also at these sites where our mostly fluent speakers and the most positive age group, above the age of 50 years old, have acquired their native language skills before migrating to the urban environment.

Importantly, our survey confirms the UNESCO's Vitality Index that Kelabit is "Definitely Endangered," given that "the language is used mostly by the parental generation and up." (UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). Where our data does show that 61% of parents do not pass on the language to their children, while only 28% do speak to their children in Kelabit (Table 7). If this is the general trend taking place among our community, I am concerned that we might not have the critical number of next generation of

speakers to pass on the language. As Don Kulick (2019) has observed a similar situation among the Gapuners with their language Tayap in Papua New Guinea, “languages die because people stop speaking them” (p. 26).

As has mentioned above, shifts from local control (horizontal plane) to non-local control (vertical plane) can occur within a couple of generation. Our “community isn’t a closed system” anymore, but a “highly open system with borders so permeable” (Brown & Salmons, 2022, p.13). This is a precursor for a multilingual society to enter verticalization process. We have experienced over the last five decades dramatic structural changes among our community, changing the life modes of communities. Transport access into and out of the villages is fluid, the internet and phone lines are available. Indeed, as Brown & Salmons (2022) suggest, underline colonialism and market capitalism have been the cause of much verticalization. Nearly every Kelabit family residing in the interior has vehicles, and those in the urban centres are multilingual, speaking mostly the dominant languages, English, Malay, Iban etc. But there are also pockets of hope since these forces can be reversed as Amelia Tsing argues in the case of the Welsh language (in Brown & Salmons 2022, p.12), where verticalization processes contributed to revitalization in Welsh. And the key here was legislation by the Welsh court, but it was the community’s willingness to embrace their language as a treasured part of their identity that means today Welsh is spoken at home and at work (Welsh Language Act, 1993). Someday, it would be a nice parallel for Sarawak’s Indigenous communities if we find favour with our own authority to legislate acts in revitalizing our languages. Until then, the task at hand is dependent upon our community. The fact that Kelabits are already highly multilingual is an important strength, and those of us who want to learn, picking up our ancestral language should not be difficult.

This research survey has also provided me with research capacity to work among my own community as someone intimately concerned about our culture and language, and able to articulate better the community’s perspectives. By conducting the language forums as part of our survey, it enhances the type of community-based research that involves and reports back to my own community on the results and potential actions that needed to be taken.

I believe that our language survey has relevance beyond our community because of its potential to mobilize other Indigenous communities in Sarawak in documenting and making efforts to strengthen their own. I also foresee a future where an ever-rising language

consciousness among our communities, combined with some political successes of our local Indigenous movement and improvement in the local economy, will contribute to generating better conditions for the maintenance of the Indigenous languages in Sarawak.

In 1946, Weng was one of the pioneers studying (learning to read and write) with the missionaries when he was free, he would etch something on the trunk of the sugui tree (Dipterocarpus oblongifolius) by the river, "So people can see it," he said. We didn't know what it was he wrote. I wonder if the markings are still there.

-Pun Do' Kereb (Senahu' Guna)

Laak 1936, Weng seh pu'un-pu'un ngan deh sekuleh ngan Tuan Lisin lad; am nuk tu'en neh, mé nieh ngurit lun kayuh sugui dih fa' rangé, "Siren lemulun," keneh. A'em men arih keli' enun dih. Ken idih tidih nekinih kieh.

Limitations

I have identified several limitations to my research with regards to the challenges and predicament of my situation. Addressing this paper's limitations help "readers draw connections between current research and the extant literature" (Ross & Zaidi, 2019, p. 263). At the outset, there are very few academic resources on language of the Indigenous peoples of Sarawak, much less on language maintenance, development, revitalization, and perpetuation (UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003, p.3). In this regard, my study can be viewed a trailblazer on material for Kelabit language. While relying largely on experience, I need to be careful in transposing approaches from elsewhere, remaining cognizant of the specific cultural, historical, and political context for the Kelabit, and in general, for other Indigenous peoples of Borneo.

Other limitations relate to the method itself and feasibility of the study area. Since I am doing a survey with our small community, I have been relying on word-of-mouth, my network of relatives, and the snow-ball effect—the more people who hear about it, the more people they will talk about it. There is also the disadvantage of being a researcher living outside of Sarawak; time and finance is a factor. Transportation to and from remotely located communities is

unpredictable and expensive, especially for doing follow-up work. But reaching out to members of the urban community was not as difficult as I thought it would be, and with scholarship funding from the university, I was able to travel into the interior without much difficulty. What I did not anticipate was how busy our community would be at year's end. It is the season for rice harvesting, so village folks were mostly in the farm or travelling downriver to get supplies for the upcoming Christmas celebration. So, this limited people's presence during the forums.

My survey has also omitted young people below the age of 16 to simplify the ethical requirement of parental consent, but also because this would have required creating another more child-and-youth-friendly tool. As a result, we may have a partial knowledge of the language status because we did not get a balanced representative story from the whole range of age groups. Another limitation was the small representative number of urban participants from Lung Seridan, despite my personal appeal and announcement in their main WAG. This can be addressed in the future with adequate planning and given more time for the forum announcement. Combined, I realize these concerns may "limit the generalizability of the conclusions drawn from the analysis" (Harris, 2020, p. 57). But there's no doubt that this study has sufficient data to create awareness that we can build upon in moving forward.

Another limitation relates to the survey itself. I had the idea that with one language survey, we could get answers to nearly every issue pertaining to the challenges facing our language. Upon analysing the data, I realized there were several shortcomings where the questions were unclear. For instance, there was problem in how some questions were phrased. In one question, participants most likely made assumptions about what it meant, because the questions were not written in ways that would solicit the kind of answers for which I was looking. Another problem was when I asked the question, what language the family uses daily, instead of asking about their specific use of Kelabit, I presented them three other language options. The following question then asked where they use the language (at home, at work, at social gatherings, or at church), which again is not specifically asking about their use of Kelabit. It may mean that their responses could be about whichever language they were using at the various events or situations being asked. The survey was also not exhaustive enough to provide detailed information on the causes/reasons for language shift. Further research would be required to build a more comprehensive theory regarding language maintenance and shift to inform us on what is happening, and consequently, what we can do about it.

An important aspect in the survey that has been less well examined is gender roles, a culturally and socially determined set of expected behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics in an understanding of masculinity and femininity. For Kelabit the traditional socio-cultural structure is framed as gendered, where men and women often have separate roles in society. The perspective is that gender roles evolved as a way to organize the necessary tasks done in a land-based farming society. In fact, our survey process relied very much on the organizing works of my nieces, sisters, cousins, and female relatives. Research has shown that gender is a consideration in language revitalization. Suffice it to say, the gender roles in language revitalization needs a much fuller discussion that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, it would have been great to conduct a collaborative analysis of language survey data with community members, but as I live outside of the community this was not feasible. I did, however, exchange informally the results with some key members. During my future trip to Sarawak, I will be sharing the full results of this survey with the community, as I have committed to. So together we can identify what would be our next steps or the future directions we will embark on in our goals and plannings.

Future directions

In terms of the future, there are broader and specific elements to consider. More broadly, it is a wonderful coincidence that our research survey falls within the United Nation's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (UNIDIL 2022-2032),¹³ providing an opportunity to mobilize Indigenous communities in Sarawak to begin documenting our languages. So far, the Malaysian and Sarawak authorities are muted in their response to the UNIDIL 2022-2032, an international UN resolution our country had agreed to implement. It is therefore important to bring to attention the relevant authorities regarding the urgent need to heed UNIDIL's 'Call to Action', which ultimately will provide the success we need at the local level.

Data from our survey could also inform the authority responsible for language policies in Malaysia to adopt a pro-active stance towards Indigenous languages revitalization during this decade. As we enter the third year of the UNIDIL, we would expect to see some efforts being

¹³ The goal of the UNIDIL 2022-2032, is "to draw global attention on the critical situation of many Indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion."

initiated by the authorities at the minimum. Otherwise, the agency of Sarawak's Indigenous language groups is required to bring our concerns to the front and center within our country. We do acknowledge that any success in reversing language loss will be the result of a "collaborative and productive relationships between language communities, governments, and academics ...breathing renewed life into historically marginalized languages across the globe" (Pine & Turin, 2017, p. 2).

The main goal of our language revitalization would be to increase the prestige of the Kelabit language among the community. Prestige is the degree of worth and social value a speech community would normally grant to their language or variant, in relation to other languages. This can be done in several ways, where our priority should be focussing on efforts to strengthen its status. This includes:

- Increasing the language use in different or new domains and media.
- Creating materials for language education and literacy.
- Creating a language committee, among other most pressing matter, to ensure that the intergenerational transmission of language is the task of every community member.
- Developing programs for parents to have the "social spaces" (Fishman, 2001), for them to be interacting and talking with their children in Kelabit, starting in their homes.
- Creating a youth task force for them to be part in identifying barriers and challenges to their learning and speaking the language. This would be a critical knowledge in ensuring that the current generation of Kelabit youth are equipped to pass on the language to future generations.

As a first survey on our language, the research has the potential to create ripple effects beyond our own community, affecting other Sarawak Indigenous communities. My expectation is that other Indigenous groups might see a parallel story in our language efforts. With the consent of our community, outreach via public forums and through social media exchanges on the processes and results of our language survey might be useful. In this respect we too can benefit from collaborating with other Indigenous groups, where our combined efforts can create a momentum in mobilizing communities for language revitalization, conducting surveys, documenting, and promoting each other languages.

After years of involvement in international Indigenous movements, I see Indigenous language campaign as part and parcel of the long-standing struggles for our land and cultural

rights. In Malaysia and Sarawak, language campaigns can piggy-back on the local Indigenous movement for land rights in collaboration with the existing coalition of Indigenous networks and alliances such as JOAS (Jaringan Orang Asal Sah-Malaysia)¹⁴, SADIA (Sarawak Dayak Iban Association), DBNA (Sarawak Dayak Bidayuh Association), SAVE Rivers, ICCA¹⁵, CSO-SDG¹⁶, and others.

We can also benefit from learning how Indigenous Nations in Canada are working with their youth in turning the tide of some threatened and disappearing languages. Investing in our next generation of youth leaders to learn the language is critical for they will be the generation to maintain and sustain it into the future. Our survey data shows that while only two of the 13 youth participants are fluent speakers, their attachment to the language is strong, where a majority believe the language will last. This statement is corroborated by Wyman et al. (2014), where “many youths share adult allegiances *to their community in maintaining Indigenous languages as part of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being*” (p. 6). However, the influence of popular media presenting in dominant languages can be overwhelming and detrimental to language revitalization, as young people find the majority of their daily lives require use of the dominant language.

There is much to learn from how Indigenous groups globally are using their territory as sites to transmit their language and culture. These on-the land education or pedagogy, such as language camps held in the wilderness for instance (Daniels, 2022), learners of ancestral language can gain cultural knowledge and connections to their land where they become more deeply rooted in their Indigenous worldview.

Since ancestral language provides a strong sense of identity to a minority and Indigenous communities, it should be held in tandem with culture as sacred rights of the community to maintain and transmit. A gift from the ancestors, we should consider ourselves as the privileged ones to be born into it. I am reminded of the examples of American earlier pioneers, the Hasidic and Amish communities (Brown & Salmons, 2022), where they were able to maintain their languages despite strong external pressures because they held it as equally sacred, like their faith.

¹⁴ The alliances of Indigenous peoples of Malaysia

¹⁵ Indigenous peoples and Communities Conserved territories & Areas

¹⁶ Civil Society Organizations for Sustainable Development Goals

They kept using their languages while performing everyday practise of the community, especially in conducting cultural and spiritual activities. Similarly, our own everyday community practises, services, and protocols should purposefully be conducted in Kelabit. So, in the future, promoting the use of Kelabit during cultural ceremonies, rituals, and official functions in the village would be beneficial. Strengthening the practise of using Kelabit in our every socio-cultural domain, should be our sacred obligation (McAdams, 2015, as cited in Daniels 2021, p. 98) not only in the villages, but adopted by the diaspora communities where group activities are predominantly Kelabit.

In summing up this chapter on the significance of this research, its limitations, and our future directions, overall, our survey has provided us with important data on the status and health of our language. Despite its precariousness, our community's emotional attachment to the language and knowledge systems is deep rooted. Which is related to participants' making strong connection with their language and Indigenous identity. Similarly, this research shows that our villages are critical sites for language maintenance and transmission, an affirmation of their traditional role that we must protect and preserve.

However, a significant limitation I faced was how little there is in terms of localized academic references on my topic, to which I relied mostly on outside sources. Another is the survey population, where young people below a certain age were not part of the survey process due to the question of ethics. The absence of data related to this group may affect a holistic view on the language use within our speech community. There were also other shortcomings in term of articulating two of the questions which perhaps may have skewed my data set. But there is no doubt that our survey has an important contribution, from which we can build on in future studies. The warm enthusiasm and collaboration of the community and its leadership is also encouraging in continuing this important work in increasing the prestige of Kelabit language.

I close with these words from former Pengulo' (headman) on the sacredness of language and its importance:

It is common that many of our younger generation who live in the urban centres have mix-marriages due to the social milieu they are in. But our culture we shouldn't forget that. According to the old people, our language is known to the spirits, where they communicate with the spirit through teteng, such as when they call for the eagles and the

sunbirds to guide their decisions. Now we pray, each race uttering their own languages, that is why we also say that even God understands our language. So, it is vitally important for us to not lose it, because we were each given a sacred language". – former Pengulo', Tulu Ayu' (Usup Raja).

Mimang mula' lun tauh nuk puli' ngen pupuh beken, kadi' deh tudo ngi la'ud nangé. Tu'uh peh kinéh, adet nih suk na'em kereb inan tauh kelupan; karuh nih ken buri' lun merar nilad, keli' ada' tidih-rengah' lun merar 'neteng' kenui ngan ngaé' nilad. Nekinih keleh sebayang tauh, karuh lem bangsa' sidih-sidih teh tauh, kapeh neh tauh am mala Tuhan peh keli' neh teh karuh tauh nih. Kapeh neh tauh kereb nesan dih: nuk biré Ieh tidih ngan abi-abi pupuh luun tana' inih."

Conclusion

This research is an eye-opener for our community, informing us of how vulnerable our language is, and the urgency of mobilizing our resources, in reversing language shift. Within just two generations of rapid exposure to the outside world and migration into the urban centers, there has been a steep erosion of the language use and intergenerational transmission in the community. An illustration of the verticalization theory (Brown & Salmons, 2022) of language shift. We now have data indicating that this is a critical period; we need to think carefully and seriously on the strategies how our younger generation can continue to get the language nourishment they should. Like a link in a chain, they are our language connectors to future generation of speakers.

Language survey is but a first step in knowing where our language use is at, yet this knowledge can also provide us with the opportunity to mitigate our language shift. The importance of our survey data is that it can be used to design language planning goals with strategies that respond to the specificity of the status, health, and feasibility for Kelabit communities. Similarly, we can be inspired by a wide range of successful revitalization models practiced by other Indigenous peoples around the world, a crucial step in our own language maintenance and second language acquisition. A crucial benefit to language revitalization is that

our people will gain greater autonomy and self-determination, part of our continued struggle for our land.

As the community moves forward with our language revitalization, I am reminded of the traditional weaving of the Kelabit long rattan mat *ugam uwé*. It is a complex and time-consuming process that begins with selection of special rattan species to meticulously creating patterns that reflects the unique design of the maker. Its utility in the longhouse is crucial, from the benign everyday usage on the verandah floor to the sacredness of the *adet* ritual proceedings. Much like the long rattan mat, reversing our “definitely endangered” language status will take the creative and dedicated efforts of our speakers and learners together.

Language is an important tool to keep our culture alive; the essence of our adet and way of life is embedded in our language passed on from our ancestors. Our generation bear that responsibility to pass it on to our children and grandchildren; and they in turn will do the same. So, it continues, as has always been.

- Pengulo' Willie Wing, Lg Seridan

Karuh nih suk pengimet adet tauh, karuh tauh kuayu' uat nuk ngerimet adet ngan lawé ulun tauh; nih nuk biré tepun tauh let nilad-nilad. Kuasa biré deh ngen tauh pemada' anak-mupun tauh nuk pipa atun. Ideh peh (anak ngan mupun) kineh tideh. Petudul-petudul ngan karuh nih, kuayu' nuk pengeh ih keleh.

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Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire in Kelabit

Kelabit Meri'it-Seridan Language Survey Form

2023

Respondent # (Matar)

A) Demographic Information:

Umur:

Dela'ih/desur:

Ngaweh/na'em ngaweh:

Sekuleh: *Teacher Training*

Rapeh inan kiko tudo nekinih? Miri

Let rapeh irat bawang kiko?

Tuda' abi lun lem takep muyuh?

15 burur

Tuda' burur lun merar, tuda' burur anakadi'?

(9) lun merar, (6) anakadi'

B) Language Status, Fluency & Use: (rena'ae)

1. Enun buri' pakai kiko kenep eso?

- LB/Kelabit/Eng/BM

2. Enun buri' pakai muyuh lem tetek ruma muyuh kenep eso?

- LB/Kelabit/Eng

3. Lem linuh kiko, mileh kiko (pegayam lem) buri Kelabit? (Linkert scale)

1-na'em mileh; 2-mileh adi'-adi' (kang-kang); 3- mileh; 4- mileh tu'uh; 5- na'em keli' kapeh;

A'ur: (4) but thinks he's @ (3)

4. Idan kereb kiko peburi' Kelabit? (kereb ngurit (/) mula')

-----/----dih ruma'

-----luk inan keraja'

-----/-----kereb peruyung lun beken (Klbt)

-----/-----lem siding (Kelabit)

-----/-----kereb irau

-----dih beken (outside)

5. Ngan iyé inan kiko tueh buri' Kelabit?

-----/----awan

-----/-----anak-anak uih

-----/-----tepun/lun merar

-----/-----kinanak uih

-----/----lun paad umur

-----/-----pupuh lun tauh Kelabit

-----lun beken (other, specify)

C) Youth/adult who speak a fair knowledge of Kelabit or don't speak it at all:

6. Kereb ko mala enun nuk naru' muyuh anakadi' mikat ela' buri' Kelabit?

i) taut peburi' kadi' na'em mileh

iv) buri' tauh na'em sukup penerang

ii) na'em lun ngajar

v) ta'ut ngan lun paad ngan arih ela' nguto

iii) na'em perlu lem kereb nuk nekinih

vi) na'em ngalap berat ela' keli'

v) other reasons...

6b. Enun nuk ngeteng tauh na'em nesu buri' Kelabit? (meré tuda'-tuda' a'ur).

-

Futures:

1. Kapeh peped buri' Kelabit nih ken kiko? keteng mulun iten tauh mé riak idih keh, na'em?

- keteng kereb teh idi mesing riak; no way we should deny its usage

2. Lem diko linuh, keteng kail teh buri' Kelabit nih mé-mé riak neh keh, na'em?

--kail lem bawang pu'un; lem rang pupuh2 tauh Kelabit; conscious lemulun nekinih
ngetu identity (iyé tu'uh tauh nih?)

keteng kereb teh idi mesing riak; no way we should deny its usage

4. Lem linuh kiko, dengkafeh tauh kereb nesu/menul buri' Kelabit nih paad idih na'em putut?

-i) keep using the language

ii) RKS education needs to encourage speakers to write stories/narrative lem Kelabit.

iii) to be involved in global Indig. orgs. that works with lang. reclamation.

4b. Kapeh tauh kereb naru' anakadi ngesu-ngesu buri' Kelabit ?

(How do you ensure the younger generation speaks the language)

i. *inan kamus*

ii. *belajar let ngan guru' (class/lessons)*

iii. *pekatu peburi' lem takep dih/lem lubang ruma' (use the language daily at home)*

iv. *belajar let ngan lun nuk mileh (master/ apprentice program)*

v. *nuk tepun nu'up/eburi'ngan mupun deh (grandparent-grandchildren)*

Enun Cause the loss of language:

- *peraruh through inter-marriages - puli'-puli' ngen bangsa' beken.*

- *more difficult is when gen employed and study away from the community.*

5. Lem linuh kiko, do' ayu neh renga' tauh ngesu-ngesu buri' Kelabit kenep eso?

D) Lun na'em mileh buri' Kelabit (p.20):

1. Inan lun nuk mileh buri' Kelabit lem takep muyuh?

2. Inan lun ruyung kiko nuk mileh buri' Kelabit?

3. Inan kereb kiko ninger buri' Kelabit?

4. Kapeh, ela' kiko belajar buri' Kelabit ?

Appendix B. Survey Questionnaire in English

Kelabit Meri'it-Seridan Language Survey Form [English version] 2023/24

A) Participant's demographic Information:

1. Age in years: i (5-14), ii (15-29), iii (30-49), iv (50-79), v (80-104),
2. Female / Male:
3. Bachelor/married: 1-Bachelor/Spinster; 2-Married; 3-Widowed/Widower
4. Education level: 1- Degrees/professional; 2-primary; 3-sec & high; 4-; 5-None
5. Where do you live now? 1-Lg Napir; 2-Lg Seridan; 3-Urban Malaysia; 4-Overseas
6. Where is your (parent) traditional home? 1-Lg Napir; 2-Lg Seridan;
7. How many people (adult & children) total live in your home?
8. How many adults (persons 25yrs and older), children and teens?
 __ adults (>25) __ children or teens & young adults (<24).

B) The Kelabit language, its current status, and health (fluency & use):

1. What language do you speak daily? (Choose relevant number/s)
 - 1-(Kelabit); 2-(BM/Malay); 3-(English); 4-(Others)
- 2 What language/s does your family speak daily? (Choose relevant number/s)

- 1-(Kelabit); 2-(BM/Malay); 3-(English); 4-(Others)

3. Where do you use the language? (Please, tick applicable ones) (*health*)

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| -----at home | -----at work (co-workers) |
| -----at social gatherings (kuman peruyung) | -----at church (Kelabit) |
| -----at ceremonies(iraui) | -----among other Kelabits |

4. With whom do you use the language? (Please, tick applicable ones) (*health*)

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| -----my spouse | -----my children |
| -----my grandparents | -----my brothers & sisters |
| -----my close friends only | -----anyone who is Kelabit |

5. In your opinion, what level is your speaking ability in Kelabit?

1)- fluent; 2)-good; 3)-speaks a little & learning; 4)-wants to learn; 5)-doesn't speak.

C) To be filled by Youth or adult who speak a fair knowledge of Kelabit.

1. What challenges do young people face for not learning Kelabit? (*circle your answers*)

- i) shy because I don't know how
- ii) there is no teacher
- iii. Kelabit not suitable for modern times.
- i) Kelabit has limited use/not enough vocabulary.
- ii) fear of being teased by friends.
- iii) Other reasons...

2. What are the common reasons youth do not speak Kelabit? (*Please, specify*).

- i) mix-marriages/parent don't teach/from young study dominant languages.
- ii) living away from roots/no speakers/no teacher.
- iii) shy/people laugh at me/little knowledge of the language.
- iv) other reasons (*Please, specify*)

D) Future of the language.

1. What do you see as the future of the language? (Will it continue to survive or not?)

- i) Still in use; ii) Depends; iii) Loss; iv) Don't know.

2. What is the reason/s for your answer above? Please write down your answers.

3. Strategies how to encourage younger generation to speak the language? (*choose ones you agree with*)

- vi. having a dictionary
- vii. Teaching, fluent speakers to teach others/having language class/creating lesson.
- viii. Parents-grandparents to speak with their grandchildren/at home.
- ix. Speak Kelabit confidently- at a feast(irau)/church/cultural gatherings.
- x. Expose the language: leaders; artists; soc. media; signboard use.

4. What are the common reasons for language loss? (*tick answers you think are correct*)

- i) mix-marriages
- ii) Parent don't teach/away from community/no Klbt friends
- iii) Use of dominant languages/Eng & BM studied at sch & are use in jobs
- iv) Apathy/shy/convenient not to/new gen. multilingual/peer pressure
- v) Others ...

5. In your opinion, is it useful to use the language always?

1. Yes; 2. Doubtful; 3. No

6. How many other languages do you speak? (choose those you speak)

- i) BM/Malay
- ii) English
- iii) Lun Bawang
- iv) Iban/Kayan

v) Others (Penan/Bisaya'/Bidayuh/Chinese/Foreign language)

E. To be filled in by Kelabits/spouse who do not speak the language.

1. In your family, does anyone speaks Kelabit?
2. Among your friends, does anyone speaks Kelabit?
3. Have you ever heard Kelabit language being spoken?
4. Do you want to speak Kelabit?

Appendix C. Survey Questionnaire in Bahasa Malaysia

Kelabit Meri't-Seridan bentuk bahasa tinjauan dalam Malay/Bahasa Malaysia

A) Maklumat demografik (Demographic Information):

1. Umur:

2. Perempuan/Lelaki:

3. Bujang/kahwin:

4. Pelajaran:

5. Dimana kamu tinggal sekarang?

6. Dari mana kampung asal kamu?

7. Berapa orang dalam keluarga kamu?

8. Berapa orang dewasa (melebihi 25 tahun), berapa orang muda?

__dewasa (25 tahun ke atas) __orang muda (24 tahun ke bawah)

B) Taraf kebolehan dlm Bahasa Kelabit (Status, Fluency & Use):

1. Bahasa apa kah yang kamu pakai tiap hari?

-

Untuk masa depan (Futures):

1. Apakah masa depan Bahasa Kelabit ini nanti? Adakah ia terus bertahan atau tidak?
 - a)-(Masih digunakan); b)-(Bergantung); c)-(Kehilangan); d)-(Tidak tahu).

2. Strategi bagaimana untuk menggalakkan generasi muda bercakap bahasa? (pilih jawapan yang anda fikir betul).
 - i. Mempunyai kamus
 - ii. Penutur yang fasih harus mengajar orang lain (MAP)/kelas bahasa/pelajaran.
 - iii. Ibu bapa-datuk dan nenek untuk bercakap dengan cucu mereka/di rumah.
 - iv. Bercakap Kelabit dengan yakin-di irau/gereja/perhimpunan.
 - v. Mendedahkan bahasa: pemimpin; artis; soc. media; penggunaan papan tanda.

3. Apakah sebab umum kehilangan bahasa? (pilih jawapan2 yang anda fikir betul)
 - i) Perkahwinan campur
 - ii) Ibu bapa tidak mengajar/menjauh fr. komuniti/tiada rakan Klbt
 - iii) Gunakan bahasa dominan/Eng & BM yang dipelajari di sch & use in jobs/
 - iv) Sikap tidak peduli/segan/mudah untuk tidak/gen baru. tekanan berbilang bahasa/rakan seumur.
 - v) Jawapan yang lain...

4. Bagi pendapat anda, apakah sikap-sikap & adat kita menyebabkan kelucutan bahasa?
(Sila berikan jawapan yang lengkap. Jika ruang tak cukup, sila tulis jawapan dalam ruang kosong di bawah.)

5. Dalam pemikiran kamu, adakah berguna kita senantiasaa pakai Bahasa Kelabit?

- i) Ya ii) Tidak pasti iii) Tidak

6. Berapakah Bahasa lain yg kamu boleh bercakap? (pilih yg anda bercakap).

- i) Bahasa Malaysia/Melayu
- ii) Bahasa Inggeris
- iii) Lun Bawang
- iv) Iban/Kayan
- v) Lain-lain (Penan/Bisaya'/Bidayuh/Cina/Bahasa Asing)

D) Bagi mereka yg tidak pandai bercakap Bahasa Kelabit:

1. Didalam keluarga kamu, adakah orang yg bercakap Bahasa Kelabit?
2. Diantara kawan kamu, adakah sesiapa yg bercakap Kelabit?
3. Pernahkah kamu mendengar orang bercakap Kelabit?
4. Bagaimana, mau kah kamu belajar bercakap Kelabit?

Appendix D. Sample consent form in Kelabit

Buri' meré keli' lem ayu' itun karuh tauh Kelabit, nuk maya' adet; "Buri' suk imo maya pian, semada' atun/pu'un." (Free, Prior, Informed, Consent)

Alamat: MIRI

Eso bulan: 08/12/2023

Uang buri' meré keli: Pitun Lem ayu' Buri'/ Karuh Tauh Lun Kelabit Meri'it ngan Seridan

Tabi' kenuan abi pupuh nuk belan kuh keh tepu', tama', sina', kanid, ngen kinanak, mé ngan anak-anak tauh.

Uih pengeh mesing tungé ngi Miri lem bulan pulu' nih. Ngubur Tuhan neh ngukab dalam muli' mé ngikak tauh seruka beruh. Lem bulan eseh ngan bulan dueh nuk nepengeh, uih miné ruma' tauh Lg Napir ngan Lg Seridan, kinéh teh neh pegayam ngan ibal pupuh tauh nuk lem bawang la'ud. Kaih neh pegayam ngan pepitun lem ayu' peped karuh/buri' tauh inih, kapeh the ulek dih musih neh. Nuk inan kuh ngesing surat sinih, kadi' uih ela' pegayam ngen tauh dengaruyung, kapeh linuh tauh ngen karuh/buri' tauh lem kereb nuk nekinih.

Lem gayam kaih, mula' tauh mala karuh tauh nih kuayu' nuk mé milep tidih. Suk inan kuh ela' naru' sabé (survey) sinih kadi' ela' pitun ngan tauh ngabi kapeh teh ayu' karuh/buri' tauh lem rang pupuh nuk dueh inih (Fa' Seridan ngan Fa' Meri'it), ken madeh idih keteng kail keh na'em? Tulu na'em enun nuk naru' idih kinéh? Itun suk kedueh, kapeh kenmula' tauh nuk keteng mileh pekaruh/peburi' Kelabit? Iyé tauh nuk keteng peburi' Kelabit lem takep ruma' tauh suleng; rapeh inan lubang ruma kema' inih tudo, ngi bawang la'ud keh ngi dayeh rangé? Kapeh, ken mileh anak-mupun tauh buri' tauh keh na'em?

A'ur-a'ur ngan linuh nuk tu'en muyuh mada' lem sabé sinih napeh tu'en kuh metapu', mé tu'en ngiti (analyse), nekap enun peped linuh muyuh ngabi. Abi a'ur-a'ur muyuh fa neh, pelaba guna kuan pupuh tauh. Uang linuh muyuh kereb ngileh tauh nekap ngan ngatur enun nuk kereb ru'en tauh lem ayu' karuh/buri' tauh mé pipa atun riak neh.

Iyé nuk ela' meré linuh dedih lem sabé inih, atun uih mala mawang niat ngen do' rema' muyuh. Mo, na'em tungen teh tauh kereb nesel iyé-iyé naru' idih, inih maya' pian tauh suleng. Renga' musih peh, iyé

suk ngenu'ud neh ngalap sabé inih, kereb tiko ngalap lubed/ meluut linuh mudih. Uih pian mala idih atun paad tauh ina awang niat, do' renga' iko ngalap idih, kinéh the renga' iko na'em paad linuh ngen idih.

Ela' uih mala ngan tauh dengeruyung, suk midih sinih (sabé), ieh kereb ngileh tauh ngekail (strengthen) karuh/buri' tauh mé pipa atun riak neh. Kadi' kinéh, linuh manid burur tauh kereb ngepiset rorum tauh, naru' eseh peped nuk do' kenuan karuh tauh, nuk tu'en tauh nesan kenuan anak ngan mupun-mupun tauh musih.

Mo, paad inih karuh kuh ruka sinih, pelaba rayeh niat kuh kereb ngesing buri' sinih kuan tauh ngeruyung. Tuhan ngeberkat nuk ru'en tauh paad-paad.

Let ngen uih, mupun, anak, kanid, ngan kinanak muyuh.

Temu' Menang Ulun (Mutang Urud).

Appendix E. Penghulu (Pengulo') Franky Isak Support Letter

Lot 185, Desa Pabahanan,
98700 Limbang,
Sarawak

12 September 2023

Re: Letter of Consent to Conduct a Language Survey Among the Kelabit

This letter is in reference to a Language Survey among the kelabit community by Mutang Urud. As an appointed Kelabit Penghulu of the Limbang region, I represent the Kelabit and Lun Bawang in the Limbang District. After my discussion with Mr. Mutang, I agree that the research on the status and health of our Kelabit language is important.

Mutang Urud is a Kelabit from our community, he has previously done a geographical and cultural mapping, research on oral history of our community, and creating our first Kelabit Dictionary. And this research is in addition to supporting the on-going work of documenting the story of our community. Language is an important issue, and we fully support this survey.

Yours sincerely,



FRANKY ISAK
Penghulu
Limbang District.



Phone: 013 547 6055
Email :frankyisak843@gmail.com

Appendix F. Summary of Descriptive Statistics

No	Variable	Stats / Values	Freqs (% of Valid)	Graph
1	Kelabit_Fluency	1. Fluent 2. Good 3. Speak a little/learning 4. Want to learn	40 (40.4%) 20 (20.2%) 31 (31.3%) 8 (8.1%)	
2	Daily_Use	1. Kelabit Only 2. Kelabit with Others 3. Non-Kelabit only	29 (29.3%) 36 (36.4%) 34 (34.3%)	
3	Family_Use	1. Kelabit Only 2. Kelabit with Others 3. Non-Kelabit only	30 (31.2%) 34 (35.4%) 32 (33.3%)	
4	Where_Speak_Kelabit	1. Home Only 2. Home and Social Gathering 3. Home, Work, and Social Ga 4. Work and Social Gathering 5. Social Gatherings Only	53 (56.4%) 10 (10.6%) 19 (20.2%) 11 (11.7%) 1 (1.1%)	
5	Kelabit_With_Grandparents_and_Parents	1. Does not Speak with Grand 2. Speaks with Grandparents	25 (26.0%) 71 (74.0%)	
6	Kelabit_With_Children	1. Does not Speak with Child 2. Speaks with Children	60 (63.2%) 35 (36.8%)	
7	Will_Kelabit_Last	1. Still in Use 2. Depends 3. Loss 4. Don't Know	52 (53.6%) 33 (34.0%) 8 (8.2%) 4 (4.1%)	
8	Kelabit_Worth_Speaking_Daily	1. Yes 2. Doubtful 3. No	96 (97.0%) 2 (2.0%) 1 (1.0%)	