

# Language development and revitalization in a South East Asian community: An insider's perspective<sup>1</sup>

Tan Sri Datuk Pandikar Amin Haji Mulia

## **Abstract**

*Article 26 of Malaysia's federal constitution guarantees that "in those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community and with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture...or to use their own language." In spite of this constitutionally given right, most ethnic minority children in Malaysia do not have the opportunity to use their mother tongue in school. In many cases, ethnic minority communities of Malaysia are in danger of losing their languages and cultures as children are increasingly socialized into Malay and English. In 1998, members of the Iranun language community in Sabah began working together, with support from SIL International, to revitalize and maintain their heritage language. They have established a language committee, developed an orthography, prepared a beginning library of graded Iranun reading materials (made possible through obtaining computers and training young Iranun speakers to use desktop publishing software) and are in the process of establishing learning centers and developing an Iranun-Malay-English dictionary.*

*This presentation describes the Iranun Language Revitalization Programme, from the perspective of an Iranun leader who is also a leader in the wider Malaysian community. It provides an insiders' perspective on the issue of the rights and ambitions of ethnic minority language groups—a perspective that is often not heard by policy makers and planners. It also presents practical information on the way that one language community has taken active steps to achieve their own goals for sustaining their heritage language and culture.*

## **Introduction**

In the slot that I have been given this morning, I will talk about Language Development and Revitalization of the Iranun language in the state of Sabah, Malaysia. For your information there are also Iranun people living in the Philippines.

My presentation has two parts. In the first part, I mention briefly why the Iranun language needs to be developed and revitalized. From there I talk about what is needed to overcome the problems and then the challenges that lie ahead. In the second part of the paper I mention the steps or actions taken by the Iranun community to reverse the decline in the use of the Iranun language.

## **PART ONE**

### **Iranun language is on its way to extinction**

The Iranun language, which is spoken by about 15-20 thousand people in Sabah, Malaysia, is on its way to extinction if the decline in use is not reversed. The reasons for this decline, amongst others, are:

- Nation building
- Education system
- Socialization
- Economic influence
- Mass media influence
- Mixed marriages
- Attitudes of the Iranun themselves

To avoid repetitiveness, I will not explain each of these influencing factors as by now I assume everyone knows what these factors are. However, for the purpose of clarity, I will explain briefly the education system of Malaysia, the constitutional right on mother tongue and the attitude of the Iranun towards the use of their mother tongue.

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### **How to stop the current trend?**

I have identified 3 important factors that can reverse the trend:

**(1) The Iranun must change their current attitude by speaking to their children in Iranun at home and in their community**

Nowadays most indigenous people have come to realize that education is the way towards greater financial opportunity. As such, without persuasion by the government, they send their children to schools. The Iranun community, like any other community, does the same.

However, while in school their children hardly use their mother tongue and when they return home they speak the language they learn at school with their parents or siblings. As a result, their own language is rapidly being lost.

Some Iranun parents are so eager to educate their children and in their eagerness, they speak to their children in Malay in the home. They think that by doing so they are helping their children in their education.

This happens, not only in mixed marriage families, but also in families where both parents are Iranun. My younger brother Abdul Muar is married to an Iranun but the family communicates in Malay at home. My sister Khadijah is also married to an Iranun, but the family communicates in Malay.

I am an Iranun, but married to a non-Iranun so my children do not speak the language. My two other sisters are married to non-Iranun and their children do not speak Iranun either.

This new phenomena is now common amongst the Iranun people and the immediate effect is that the generation after me is not conversant in Iranun language anymore. Many in the villages can understand it and some in the town, but they cannot speak it.

**(2) The language must be taught in school.**

Dr. Gonzales (in this conference)<sup>2</sup> rightly said that to guarantee that a language will not be lost is to teach the language in the schools. Likewise he said to lose the language, stop teaching the language in school. He cited the decline of the use of English in Malaysia as an example: the use of English in Malaysia declined in one generation when the government decided not to teach English in school.

At the moment, apart from the Chinese and Tamil people who have their own vernacular schools to go to, there are three ethnic minority languages taught in school, either as a Pupil's Own Language (POL) a couple hours per week or as a subject. These are Iban, Kadazandusun and Semai. The Kadazandusun language has been taught in school since 1997 and Semai was introduced more recently. This is proof that the government is receptive to new and good ideas.

**(3) The government must support mother tongue education actively.**

Help from the government is imperative. The government's help in this context is to provide financial assistance, adequate manpower (teachers), facilities such as schools and educational materials such as books etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Gonzalez' paper is one of the plenary papers in this section of the web site.

I must stress here that all three of these factors are crucial and dependent on each other. In the absence of one, the measure will not be effective.

### **How to make the Iranun change their “mindset”?**

The Iranun mindset now is “to escape from the wrath of poverty and to put the Iranun on an equal standing with the other successful ethnic groups.” The Iranun have a motto for this “imbida’ an yan”, meaning, “What’s the difference.” They realize that the vehicle to escape poverty is education. As such, the Iranun are now so focused on their children’s formal education—believing that the only way for them to escape the wrath of poverty is to be educated and to get a secure job somewhere in the government’s tall buildings—that if you tell them that education is not everything in life, it will be considered as sabotaging their families’ future plans.

The only way to change this mindset is to instill PRIDE in them by reminding them of the Malay attitude towards their language. According to a Malay writer, Omar (1987:66), The Malays would rather die than lose their language to a foreign one. The Malay people have a motto “bahasa jiwa bangsa”, which means language is the *soul of a race*. If the Malays feel that way, the Iranun should feel the same.

I certainly feel that way. I am now in pain. I see my “soul” right in front of my eyes, dying.

Secondly, they must be made aware of the fact that their children would actually do better in their studies if they were taught using their mother tongue from an earlier age in schools.

### **How to change the government’s mindset?**

The government’s mindset is reflected in the Constitution and in the Education system.

**Constitution.** Article 152 of the Federal Constitution provides that while the Malay language has been recognized as the national language, no person is prohibited from teaching his own mother tongue; every person has the right to use his own mother tongue for non-official purposes; and the Government has the right to preserve and sustain the use and study of mother tongue of any other ethnic minority communities.

*The national language shall be the Malay language.... provided that (a) no person shall be prohibited from using (otherwise than for official purposes) or from teaching or learning any other language”; and (b) nothing in this Clause shall prejudice the right of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of another community in the Federation. Article 152*

This provision does not help us – the Iranun – in preserving and sustaining our language against the undesired effect brought about by the tidal wave of development and modernization. Yes, it is true that the constitution does not forbid the use of our language but it also does not explicitly state that mother tongues should be taught in school. As such, the ethnic minorities’ right under this provision is subject to the court interpretation and becomes just a matter of discretion of the policy maker.

To me, the provision of the constitution creates unfairness as it helps the migrant ethnic groups such as the Chinese and the Indian but not other ethnic groups such as the Iranun. My reasons for saying so are:

**(1) Before independence (1957), the Chinese and Indian had their vernacular schools and the constitution and the education system allows the continuance of these vernacular schools.**

Experts say one way of preserving the existence of a language is of course to use the language as a medium of teaching in schools.

If this is true, then the Chinese and Indian in Malaysia are very fortunate. Besides being allowed to continue the operation of their vernacular schools, thus guaranteeing the survival of their language, there are over one billion Chinese outside Malaysia speaking Chinese and preserving the Chinese culture and there are also hundreds of millions of Indians outside Malaysia speaking Tamil and preserving the Indian culture.

The other ethnic groups in Malaysia, those who do not have “brothers and sisters” outside Malaysia and whose number is only in the tens of thousands and in some cases in the hundreds and whose language is eminently in danger of being lost, are very unfortunate indeed. For example, if the Orang Asli languages and culture, comprising 18 aboriginal language groups in Peninsula Malaysia, is lost in Malaysia, it will be lost forever. God will not create it again. In Malaysia there are only three Bumiputera (sons of the soil) ethnic groups out of more than one hundred whose mother tongues are taught in school as one subject. These are the Iban, Kadazandusun, and Semai.

In 2003 the government spent RM20 million for Chinese Education and not one ringgit (RM1) for the mother tongue education of the Iranun, Bajau or the dozens of other Bumiputera ethnic minorities.

***(2) It came to my attention that children, who are taught in their mother tongue at an earlier age in schools throughout their primary years, increase their ability to become successful learners (C.f., Thomas and Collier 1997).***

If this finding is true, then Chinese and Indian students are very lucky indeed. In Malaysia these are the only ethnic groups who have vernacular schools to go to. The other ethnic groups such as the Iban, Kadazandusun and Semai are only taught their language in school on a very limited basis as either the Pupil Own Language (POL) or as a subject.

In her article entitled, “*When Mother-Tongue education is not preferred*”, Anthea Fraser Gupta, (1997) a lecturer at the School of English, University of Leeds said:

*The non-bumiputera (such as the Chinese and the Indians) continue to be ahead of the Malays on most economic, social and education indexes (Khuo, 1955) and achieved, on average, higher results than bumiputera in Malay-based education systems (Schiffman 1996).*

No wonder then that there are more Chinese and Indian lawyers, doctors corporate figures and other professionals in Malaysia compared to the other ethnic groups.

While these two ethnic groups – Chinese and Indian – are talking about the growth and expansion of their mother tongue education in school and the current status of their vernacular schools and the schools’ condition, the rest of the ethnic minority groups such as the Iranun, Bajau etc., do not even realize the grave situation they are in. Even if they realized, they are helpless to do much as they are generally poor compared to the Chinese and Indian.

***(3) It is argued by some experts that a mother tongue can be considered as part of a national heritage and its disappearance is equivalent to an irreversible loss of a part of this heritage.***

If this is true, then Malaysian policy makers have overlooked a very important matter. The system we have now is not conducive for preserving the mother tongues. It is tilting more towards eradicating the existence of ethnic languages, apart from the Malay, Chinese and Tamil. As noted above, the Iban, Kadazandusun and Semai languages are also taught in school, but on a very limited basis – only a couple hours each week in the higher primary grades.

### Malaysia's education system

The education system of Malaysia is very simple. The government builds the schools, colleges and universities and teachers training colleges and finances these institutions. The teachers, lectures and professors are paid as government civil servants. The schools' syllabus and curriculum are standardized. The medium of teaching is predominantly Malay. The second language is English and is a medium of instruction in Science and Math.

However, the government also allows the setting up of private schools and colleges, provided these schools and colleges comply with government terms and conditions. The medium of teaching can be either Malay or English.

Besides the above, the government also allows the continuance of Vernacular schools. The more popular vernacular schools are the Chinese and Indian schools. I use the word "continuance" because Chinese and Indian vernacular schools have been in existence since before independence in 1957.

#### *Malaysian Chinese Education System, 1957-1997*

Year	Chinese pop.	Primary School	Secondary School
1957	2,300,000	1,342	86
1997	5,263,000	1,281	60

However, the government does not allow the setting up of private universities or other institutions of higher education that use Chinese and other ethnic languages as a medium of instruction on the grounds of public policy (cf., Merdeka University Bhd. Case vs. Government of Malaysia 1981 (2MLJ) 356). Public policy in this context is based on the fear that the objective of the education system, to create a united, disciplined and skilled community will be ineffective because it is thought that unity can be achieved only by speaking one common language, in this instance, Malay.

Apart from the educational institutions mentioned above, the government through other ministries such as the Ministry of Rural Development and Ministry of National Unity and Community Development are building preschool infrastructures in the urban and rural areas.

### A flawless education system?

As noted above, the objective of the education system is to fulfill the national objectives: *creating a community that is united and disciplined as well as skilled.*

A foreign dignitary – Mushadid Hussain – who visited Malaysia recently on a fact-finding mission, wrote an article about Malaysia. The Dubai-based *Gulf News* published his article. In the article he asked Muslims worldwide, whom he said are downright demoralized these days and groping in the dark for instant solutions to long-standing problems, to examine the basis of the Malaysian success story. Hussain—a former Pakistan cabinet minister and currently a member of Pakistan's Upper House, the Senate, has this to say about Malaysia:

*Why is it that Malaysia has succeeded where others have failed? How come a state with a mixture of races and religions, has glued into a nation, with an inclusive, tolerant political culture? After all Malaysia had to face a long-running Communist insurgency during its formative years."*

Hussain identified a number of reasons for Malaysia's success as a nation with the main one being *leaders* who have the vision to articulate and implement policies, *especially in making education their number one priority.*

If what Hussain said about Malaysia's success is true, then the education system must be flawless. Yes, I agree the education system of Malaysia is flawless, but only to a certain extent. It is only flawless in respect to the objectives for which it was devised or programmed, that is, to have a united, loyal, skilled, knowledgeable and tolerant multiracial citizen. These objectives have been achieved. The Malaysian citizen is united, loyal, skilled, knowledgeable and tolerant. This specially "created citizen" made Malaysia prosperous as it is today.

#### **Negative effect of the education system**

However, whether deliberate or not, the system has brought with it an undesirable effect in other aspects. The system confuses me. On one hand I am thankful to the system because it has brought immense benefit to my community and to me. On the other hand, I loathe the system.

It could not be denied that the education system contributed to the prosperity of Malaysia and as a result of this prosperity, the government was able to bring development to my community. Before independence (1957), the villages of the Iranun did not have basic infrastructures such as roads, water, and electricity. Now we have them. Our standard of living is better now than before. The government built mosques, schools and other facilities for us. For all these, I am thankful to the system. Above all, I am grateful to the system because it has given me the opportunity to serve my community as their leader.

But our gratitude as a community would have been more meaningful if the system did not "kill our soul". The Malay have a saying, "bahasa jiwa bangsa", which literally means, "Language is the soul of a race". The imminent loss of the Iranun language is, to us, tantamount to killing our soul. For without being able to speak their mother tongue, the Iranun future generations cannot proudly call themselves Iranun.

#### **Mother tongue education; the policy**

I must admit that there is a provision in the education system that allows for the mother tongues of the numerous other languages to be taught in school as the "Pupil's Own Language", if requested by the parents and if there are at least 15 students to make up a class. However, I must also point out that this provision is inadequate. I am certain there are not many people, especially the Bumiputera ethnic groups, who know about the existence of this provision. The education department does not go out of its way to explain to the people concerned.

In any case, this provision is almost impossible to implement even if the criteria are fulfilled. For example, if the Iranun parents were to request its implementation in the schools where there are many Iranun students, the school would not be able to meet the request if there are no trained Iranun teachers or materials for teaching that can be used immediately. In some other ethnic groups the language is not even written yet.

#### **Passive policy**

The experience of the Kadazandusun, whose mother tongue has been taught in school as a subject since 1997, tells us that before an ethnic language could be taught in school either as Pupil's Own Language or as a subject, the ethnic group concerned has to prepare the material to be used for teaching. What this means is that it is incumbent upon the ethnic groups to help themselves before the government lends a helping hand.

## **PART TWO**

Having said all this, I am not bitter and angry. I am only envious of the success of the Chinese and Indians in the field of mother tongue education. There is an old Iranun proverb, which says, "Dapai man su magari bpagatau sa akal, ingena'an u isa ka payungan sa ubur-ubur a baning" (Even siblings compete and try to out do each other. Each wants to be shaded by a golden umbrella).

Mindful of the current education policy on mother tongue education, the Iranun of Sabah, Malaysia are now helping themselves to preserve and revitalize their mother tongue. Before I explain the things that we do, allow me to briefly introduce to you the Iranun of Sabah.

### **The Iranun of Sabah**

The Iranun of Sabah, Malaysia live mainly in 22 villages in the District of Kota Belud. There are also 2 villages in Tungku Lahad Datu and 2 villages in Kudat. These villages are located on the west coast, along the shoreline of the Usukan and Tampasuk plain, approximately 80 kilometers north of Kota Kinabalu, the state capital of Sabah. There is also an Iranun community found in the fringe of the state capital – Likas village.

The exact number of the Iranun population in Sabah is not known. The reason is that the Iranun have been categorized under the Bajau, an ethnic majority in the District of Kota Belud. Asmah (1983; 272) has given a very low estimate of the Iranun population at five thousand whereas Datu Bandira (1996:8), an Iranun, put it at twenty thousand.

Regarding the Iranun economy, most of the older generation are fishermen, farmers, paddy planters and small time traders dealing local handicrafts such as the *tubau* (headgear). Most of the younger generation are self-employed, small time businessmen or government civil servants.

### **The Iranun Language**

The Iranun language is called ‘kadtaru a Iranun’ and is very different from the other ethnic languages found in Sabah. Even the Bajau language, which is identified closely with the Iranun (Iranun sometimes categorized under Bajau), is very different from the Iranun. For example:

Iranun	Bajau	English	Malay
Antuna i ngaran ka’?	Sian urun no?	What is your name?	Siapa nama awak

### **The Iranun language revitalization programme<sup>3</sup>**

As long as I can remember I have always been proud of my identity, culture and language—the Iranun. At the age of 14, while studying for my secondary education at a college in the state capital, I was almost thrown out of school for fighting with a fellow student. The reason for the fight was that he was teasing me by calling me a name—pirate descendant. To him the word Iranun or Ilanun or Lanun meaning in Malay is ‘pirate’. I was offended and angry, so I gave him a black eye.

I also remember an incident when as a university student I walked into an exhibition hall exhibiting traditional handicrafts and costumes. I was shocked to see a traditional Iranun horse saddle made by my uncle on display, but the description written below said, “This is a traditional Bajau horse saddle.” Actually the saddle was mine and I had given it to my art teacher when I was a college student. At the same exhibition I also saw a traditional headgear, ‘tubau’, normally woven by the Iranun community, described as woven by the Kadazandusun.

These two incidents made me realize the importance of having an identity. Losing the Iranun language is something that I cannot accept and I think the Iranun community shares my feelings.

So, a few years ago, I decided that I should do something concrete to put things right. As it happens, luck was on my side. When I was the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports of Sabah, I became acquainted with a research officer of the Ministry, Dr. Jacqueline Kitingan. She understood the Iranun problem. She introduced me to a retired linguistic professor, Howard McKaughan who happened to be an SIL consultant. Professor Howard became my consultant for the Iranun project for free. He told me that I need professionals to help me. “First” he said, “you have to solve the problem of orthography, if you want the Iranun literature to be put into writing. And that” he said, “can only be done after a

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<sup>3</sup> See Annex for a brief description of the Iranun language programme

phonological study has been done.” The words orthography and phonology were something new to me and I did not see its relevance to the project at that time. Now I fully understand the relevance.

Anyhow, in 1995 again through Dr. Jacqueline Kitingan, and advised by Professor Howard, I invited SIL to help me in the Iranun Language Project. In 1996 Professor Howard started his linguistic research of the Iranun language. In 1998, Jim and Karla Smith of the Institut Liniistik SIL, Sabah, Malaysia came to us and begun to work with our Iranun Language Project.

Recently, I sponsored the formation of an association called The Iranun Language and Cultural Organization or Persatuan Bahasa Kebudayaan Iranun (BKI). The Registrar of Societies registered this association on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2003. Among others, the function of this association is to coordinate and oversee the development of the project and to help with funding.

### **Future Plans.**

Our immediate plans are:

- (1) To have a learning centre and a small library at each of the four identified zones. All the Iranun books and other printed Iranun materials and also books in Malay and English will be kept in the centres.
- (2) To have workers in each learning centre who know how to use computers. These computer trainers will teach teenagers and adults how to use the computers so that they can use their newly acquired skill to write Iranun books, etc.
- (3) To use the learning centres to conduct classes for illiterate adults. The students will be taught in Iranun with the hope that when they are able to read and write, they will also write for the benefit of the community.
- (4) To prepare enough materials to submit to the education department that they will consider the Iranun language ready to be taught in school as POL and eventually as a subject.
- (5) To train interested individuals from the Iranun community to be Iranun language teachers and to teach using Iranun as the medium of instruction.
- (6) Ultimately, of course, to have kindergarten classes using our Iranun language as medium of instruction.

### **Challenges**

The challenges that lie ahead are many. The obvious one, of course, is finance. For our plans to take off, we need money to build the learning centers, to buy printing materials, computers and to pay the expenses of the day-to-day running of the learning centers. For the learning centers to operate smoothly, full time salaried staff members are needed.

As it is, the Iranun community does not realize that their language is on its way to extinction. They are comfortable and are enjoying the fruits of prosperity of the nation. As such it will be challenging to change this mindset. It will be a monumental task to make them understand that the development that they are enjoying now is at the expense of losing their language.

I also realize that the success of this project depends on the support and understanding of the government and other parties that sympathizes with the plight of the ethnic minorities. To have their support, the Iranun community has to show to them that they are serious in their quest for the Iranun language to be taught in school and to be further developed.

## **Conclusion**

Mother tongue education in Malaysia has always been a thorny issue. The reason is historical. For one thing, the most vocal about this issue have been the migrant ethnic minorities—the Chinese and Indian. The Bumiputera ethnic groups, particularly the Malay, see this as a threat that has a divisive tendency. The Chinese and Indians are vocal because they want to preserve what they had before independence. Before independence (1957), these two ethnic minorities had their own vernacular schools.

In the early days of independence, Malaysia's position as a nation was precarious due to the communist's insurgency and racial tensions. The communist movement was predominantly Chinese based, led by Chin Ping, with the later involvement of the Malay, led by Rashid Maidin. The fear of divisiveness actually stems from the bad experience that the nation went through on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1969 when the Malays and the Chinese clashed.

The other Bumiputera ethnic minorities such as the Iban in Sarawak and the Kadazandusun in Sabah have not brought up the issue of mother tongue as aggressively as the migrant ethnic groups because they were and still are preoccupied with a different priority, that is, to put their respective ethnic groups on the same economic and educational standing with the Chinese and Indians. One must remember that the Chinese and Indians were and still are advanced in almost all aspects compared with the Bumiputera ethnic minorities. Now the other Bumiputera ethnic minorities are just beginning to voice mother tongue education – softly.

Mr. David Klaus, while presenting his paper on Papua New Guinea education system here at this Conference, said that

*Every country is unique; each has their unique problem; and each country must find its unique way to solve its unique problems.<sup>4</sup>*

Likewise, Herbert Bayward Swope (1950) said:

*I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure..., which is: Try to please everybody.*

This is the way that Malaysia's policy makers think. They cannot please everybody and problems are solved in the Malaysian way.

The situation in Malaysia now as far as ethnic minority mother tongue education is concerned is that the government allows it *passively*. It is incumbent upon the ethnic minority group to start the ball rolling and once the government notices that there is a serious and genuine effort by the ethnic minority concerned, then the government will give a helping hand like in the case of the Kadazandusun language which has been taught in school as a subject since 1997.

Why passively? The government wants to protect and maintain the present status quo, a harmonious and prosperous Malaysia. *And I think all Malaysians want that.*

Like Martin Luther King, I have a dream:

## **My Dream**

My dream is that all the ethnic minorities in the world will be accorded equal treatment and recognition in all aspects of their lives by their respective governments.

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<sup>4</sup> Klaus, David. The use of indigenous languages in basic education in Papua New Guinea: A model for elsewhere? Paper presented at the Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education, Bangkok, Thailand, November 2003. *This paper was first published in Language and Education: An International Journal*, 17 (2). 2003.

I dream that those who are in the majority and have all the power to do whatever they like will be understanding, compassionate and helpful to the minorities; to the extent that they make the minorities feel proud of their existence and stand tall amongst the tallest, even though they know they are actually midgets.

I dream that the “learned and the enlightened” majority will guide the “helpless and ignorant” minorities and show and tell them what is rightfully theirs.

I dream that the wealthy majority will be benevolent and willing to disburse a minute portion of their wealth to the needy minorities, to the extent that the needy minorities do not feel that they are beggars.

I dream that the minorities will be “loyal and obedient to the wishes of the majority” and that the majority will respond with compassion; to the extent that they make the minorities feel like they are not surrendering their inherent rights.

I dream that the sacrifices of the minorities in achieving the objectives of nation building will be viewed as equally important and valuable compared to the sacrifices of the majority.

And I dream that the meaning of the word minorities will have the same meaning of the word majorities; for in the eyes of the Creator, all are equal!

I thank you all for listening.

## Annex. Brief history of the Iranun Language Project

Jim Smith, SIL International, consultant to the project

An initial meeting was called. All the leaders from all the Iranun villages were invited to attend. In the meeting, the attendees were informed of the purpose of the meeting and were asked if they wanted a project in the Iranun language and whether they would be involved if such a programme were initiated. Those attending the meeting decided that they did want the programme and would be involved. The meeting resolved that:

- (1) An advisory committee should be formed. The members include all Iranun leaders present.
- (2) The 22 Iranun Villages in the District of Kota Belud were divided into four zones and each zone was asked to set up an Executive Committee.<sup>5</sup> This committee formed working committees. An example of such a working committee is the *recording stories committee* whose function is to record all the traditional stories. The Executive Committee oversees the functions of these working committees.

The first job of the committees was to record some of the traditional stories and history of the Iranun. These tape-recorded materials were to be transcribed. Initially, the transcriptions could not be done because the Iranun did not have an orthography. While the orthography was being devised, Jim and Karla Smith also started training the workers in the four zones to use computers.

In 1998, a seminar was held to explain the proposed Iranun orthography. Participants at the seminar decided to adopt the orthography, which was based on the linguistic analysis and preliminary phonological description done by Professor Howard. With a proposed orthography in place, the Iranun were ready to begin writing their literature.

A three-part writers' workshop, led by Jim and Karla Smith, began in 1999 to train the Iranun in the use of the newly acquired spelling system and to write books in the Iranun language. Subsequent workshops were held to encourage the participants to write traditional stories, experience stories, children's books, a picture dictionary and the traditional customs of the Iranun. In the workshop, the participants were also taught editing. All of the materials produced in these workshops were printed as reading materials and reference for the Iranun community. The Iranun community, including the computer trainees, produced all these materials.

The Iranun Language project has so far produced more than 175 different booklets, including children's books, and has also printed some calendars. The Sabah Museum has printed a grammar sketch of the Iranun language produced by Professor H. McKaughan and is now in the process of printing an Iranun picture dictionary. A volume of traditional Iranun stories is being prepared for submission to the Sabah Museum for printing. Also, a trial edition of adult learning-to-read materials has been produced and other materials are in process.

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<sup>5</sup> Two more zones were recently added in 2003, after the initial divisions in 1998.