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THE STATUS OF REMUN VIS-A-VIS IBAN

Peter F. Cullip

ABSTRACT

Relatively little has been written about the Remun Iban of Sarawak and even less about the Remun isolect. This study follows on from a recent initial exploration of Remun language use and attitudes, and endeavors to document Remun wordlists from both Kampong Remun, and the periphery Remun community of Tanah Mawang. Initial work suggested a shift by this latter community from Remun to Iban. The study set out to examine this hypothesis by means of lexicostatistical comparison. In addition, the study aimed to test the claim by members of the Kpg. Remun community, by means of intelligibility testing, that Remun is inherently unintelligible to non-Remun Iban. The results suggest that there has been a shift - largely lexical - by the Tanah Mawang Remun from Remun to Iban and Malay. The Remun intelligibility claim was also confirmed, with the linguistic status of Remun as spoken in Kpg. Remun, by some standards, approaching that of a separate language.

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INTRODUCTION

The Remun Iban of Kampong Remun in south-west Sarawak take great pride in the perception that while they, as a community, can 'inherently' understand other Iban (except Sibuyau [see, for example, Kroeger, 1999]), these groups cannot inherently understand Remun. The *Tuai Rumah* (Headman) of Kpg. Remun asserts that the Remun 'tongue' is a special gift from God (Malana ak. Jimbai, *pers. comm.*, 1998). This perception would seem to be a major factor contributing to the strong sense of Remun identity in Kpg. Remun, centering on language (Cullip, 2000¹). While this

may be the case for Kpg. Remun and perhaps the two adjacent Remun villages of Kpg. Triboh and Kpg. Lebor, the picture is complicated by the exposure and more accommodating attitudes of outlying Remun villages to the Iban and their language (known as *Iban amat* – or ‘true’ Iban – by the Remun). Some borrowing from, and shift to, Iban has been reported by residents of Kpg. Tanah Mawang, for example. As almost all (98%) adults in Kpg. Remun profess fluency (receptive and productive) in Iban (Cullip, 2000), it was assumed that a similar situation would exist in Kpg. Tanah Mawang. Iban is a major *lingua franca* in the area. There would be little point therefore in testing the degree of intelligibility of Iban to Remun speakers (or of Remun [TM] to Remun [R] speakers). Consequently, the study² focused on lexicostatistical comparisons of Remun (Kpg. Remun), Remun (Kpg. Tanah Mawang) and Iban and intelligibility testing of these three communities³.

The objectives were as follows:

1. record and transcribe wordlists from the Remun (R), Tanah Mawang (TM) and Iban (Ib) communities;
2. make lexicostatistical comparisons of these lists to calculate cognate percentages and the extent of phonological differences; and
3. measure the inherent intelligibility of:
 - a. R to Ib speakers
 - b. TM to Ib speakers
 - c. R to TM speakers⁴.

Intelligibility tests are necessary because measures of cognate relations are unsatisfactory measures of intelligibility (Grimes, 1995: 22). Grimes (1995: 22) notes instances reported in Melanesia where shared cognates were calculated at above 80%, yet intelligibility scores varied from just over 0% to 100%. Wood (2000: 192) suggests that if two varieties share more than 60% and less than 95% of their vocabulary, intelligibility testing is called for.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SKETCH

The Remun were part of the first Iban migration from the Kapuas Basin and coastal areas of Kalimantan to Sarawak during the middle of the sixteenth century (Sandin, 1994: 1). Finally settling at the foot of Remun hill on the Remun River, the Remun have since spread to the south and south-east as far as the Balai Ringin area. Today there are at least 15 Remun villages with a total population of around 4000⁵. The core 'original' settlements are Kpg. Remun and Kpg. Lebor.

KAMPONG REMUN

Kpg. Remun straddles the Gedong road around 5 km from the junction with the Kuching-Sri Aman road that lies approximately 68 km from Kuching and 8 km from Serian (see map). Regular buses and vans shunt between Gedong, a small Malay settlement, and multiethnic Serian town. Many of Kpg. Remun's 600 or so residents possess motorcycles while fewer boast cars or vans.

The village consists of a two small five- and eight-door longhouses and scattered wooden or concrete dwellings. Residents enjoy electricity, and piped water will arrive soon. The residents are serviced by a government primary school, three sundry stores, a community hall, three rice-processing mills and a *rumah guna* for storing heads and other sacred items. With most people belonging to the Anglican church and a small number following Bahai teachings, the small Anglican church and the Bahai centre are central to village life.

The Remun of Kpg. Remun are essentially farmers, though increasing numbers work in both the public and private sectors – including a nearby oil-palm plantation. Both wet and dry padi are cultivated, and fruit trees and fishponds are maintained. The surrounding jungle affords a plentiful supply of edible plants and fruits and a less and less plentiful supply of wild game.

Kpg. Remun is linguistically isolated in a largely Bidayuh and Malay immediate environment.