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LANGUAGE USE AND ATTITUDES OF THE REMUN OF SARAWAK: INITIAL EXPLORATIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Sarawak's Remun community occupy a cluster of villages southeast of the town of Serian. The Remun, while ethnically and linguistically identifiable as Iban, speak an isolect which is said to be inherently incomprehensible to speakers of other Iban dialects. A relatively small population, inter-marriage and socio-economic pressures could be expected to produce pressure for language shift in such a multilingual community. The aim of this study was to examine patterns of language use and language attitudes among the Remun of Kampong Remun.

The Remun inhabit a complex, polyglossic linguistic environment and most interact using a variety of codes on a daily basis. While there is some evidence to suggest that language shift towards Iban is taking place in neighbouring Remun communities, it was found that a strong sense of identity centring on language, and community attitudes towards Iban settlement in the area, have resulted in the use of Remun being maintained in critical domains in Kampong Remun.

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INTRODUCTION

The Remun Iban occupy a broad cluster of villages in Serian District, south to southwest of Simunjan in Sarawak's Samarahan Division. Some 3600¹ Remun live along the Krang river and its tributaries between Serian and Balai Ringin. Surrounding them

* This study is dedicated to the memory of Ahok ak. Nyungkan (11 April 1960 - 19 April 1999).

are the demographically more powerful Bukar-Sadong Bidayuh, and Malay and Iban communities. The Remun are also known as Milikin, particularly in early colonial official classifications (e.g. *Sarawak Government Census* 1961, Ray 1913: 10, Grimes 1999).

The Remun islect is recognised as a dialect of Iban and is deserving of attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, although the group is officially subsumed under the Iban umbrella label, the reactions of Iban and others to mention of the Remun invariably demonstrate either unawareness of the community or a fascination with the observation that the Remun dialect is incomprehensible to Iban speakers. This is clearly not the case with other Iban communities and their dialects, with the exception perhaps of the Sebuyau (Kroeger 1999). I have been able to find only one study – a word list collected at the close of the 19th century (Ray 1913) – of the Remun language, although Kedit (1995) has published an oral history account and Sandin (1994) has documented early group migration.

Secondly, informal discussions with a number of residents in Kampongs Remun, Lebor and Triboh suggest a strong sense of Remun identity centred on language. Malana Jimbai, the *Tuai Rumah* (Headman) of Kampong Remun, believes that the Remun ‘tongue’ is a special gift from God² in that while the Remun can understand Iban speakers (inherent comprehensibility), it is claimed that the Iban cannot understand the Remun.³

Finally, questions of language use, attitudes and possible shift are particularly significant given the demographic and linguistic characteristics of the community and its immediate neighbours and the political and socio-economic macro-pressures on the language ecology of the community.

This study is concerned mainly with addressing matters related to the last of these reasons while tentatively exploring the concerns of the other two.