

Reviving the Iban alphabet

May 18 2015



The Iban alphabet was invented in 1947. Credit: Universiti Teknologi MARA

A Malaysian indigenous group has revived its alphabet from the brink of extinction, thanks to specially designed computer fonts.

The Iban is the largest indigenous group in Malaysia with a population of more than one million, most of whom live in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. The Iban [language](#) is fairly common. It is the only indigenous language that is officially taught in Sarawak schools and is spoken not only among the Iban but also between the Iban and other ethnic groups. However, it was not a [written language](#) until Dunging anak Gunggu invented the first Iban alphabet in 1947.

In 2010, extending Duning's work, Dr Bromeley Philip of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak developed computer fonts for the Iban alphabet, called LaserIban. His aim is to help preserve the Iban alphabet in digital form in the modern world. The LaserIban is available for Windows and Macintosh computers and is completely cross-platform compatible.

Using the LaserIban, Dr Philip has launched a course called the "Training unto LaserIban System", or TULIS, Programme. (TULIS means "writing" in Iban.) "The ultimate purpose of the course is to help revive the otherwise disappearing Iban alphabet," he explains.

Dr Philip is now re-alphabetising three Iban folktales, which are currently written in Latin, using the Iban alphabet as part of an effort to transcribe as many Iban language materials as possible. He is also building an Iban alphabet dictionary for use as a reference for the Iban spelling system.

"Most Iban, [whether] old or young, are by now aware that the Iban language has its own [alphabet](#) that can be used to accurately translate the Iban's spoken language into a written language," Dr Philip says.

Provided by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

Citation: Reviving the Iban alphabet (2015, May 18) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-reviving-iban-alphabet.html>

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