

Iban's only known system of writing stepping into modernity

IBAN ALPHABET

ALPHABETICAL AND SYLLABIC SYMBOLS

⦿	is	ᵢ	it	ᵉ	ao	Δ	a	⦿	lap
⦿	cha	⦿	oi	⦿	oh	∟	uw	⦿	ein
⦿	op	ᵑ	A	⦿	ah	∟	il	⦿	ba
ᵑ	sas	ᵑ	ja	∟	ut	ᵉ	I	ᵑ	ong
ᵉ	or	⦿	ga	∟	al	⦿	ra	ᵉ	eix
ᵑ	ya	ᵑ	ok	∟	ak	∟	ap	ᵑ	eig
⦿	ma	ᵢ	E	ᵑ	nga	∟	ta	ᵉ	ir
ᵑ	nya	ᵑ	pa	ᵑ	ieng	ᵉ	na	⦿	ang
ᵑ	om	ᵑ	am	∟	an	ᵑ	da	ᵑ	oug
∟	au	ᵑ	as	∟	un	ᵉ	at	ᵑ	R
ᵉ	us	ᵑ	ieh	ᵑ	ek	∟	ul	⦿	O
ᵑ	ka	ᵑ	iem	ᵑ	ip	∟	eng		

OLD SYSTEM : The 59 symbols representing the phonological sounds in the Iban language.

KUCHING – This is a fact: Ibans do have their own system of writing, consisting 59 symbols representing phonological sounds in the Iban language.

This system of writing had its origins in Debak, Betong Division, and named Urup Iban Dungle (Dungle's Alphabet) after its inventor Dungle Gunggu.

According to researcher Dr Bromeley Philip Nyanggau, Dungle who was born in the early 1900s at Nanga Ulai longhouse in Debak, had committed his entire working life to the invention and development of the first ever-comprehensive Iban Alphabet.

Until today, it remains the only known Iban system of writing to be existence as was recognized and recorded in the Encyclopedia of Iban Studies,

“Unknown to most Ibans, his (Dungle's) demise in 1985, exactly 20 ago, had left the Ibans with invaluable intellectual heritage, a full set of Iban Alphabet,” Dr Bromeley told Tribune in a recent interview.

Not wanting the Alphabet to disappear with time, this promising Iban academic and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) lecturer, is now undertaking a research towards scientifically and systematically refining the Dungle's Alphabet for practical inscriptional purposes.

UiTM's Institute of Research, Development and Commercialisation (IRDC) had agreed to finance the research project under its fundamental research grant for a one-year period, starting last April.

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Cambridge University shows interest in Dungle's alphabet

Among the goals this project aimed to achieve, according to Dr Bromeley, was to digitise the Dungle's Alphabet by creating fonts for use in word processing software on computers.

“We need to preserve the Dungle's Alphabet not only from disappearing but also to breath life to it for practical use in modern writing,” he said.

As of now, the sole custodian of this system of writing is Dungle's nephew, retired school principal Bagat Nunui, who is also the current tuai rumah (headman) of Nanga Ulai longhouse.

Dr Bromeley said that based on his research, Dungle during his life time self-taught himself into learning how to read Romanised alphabets and a bit of Malay Jawi.

“He then developed a full set of Iban Alphabet, starting from 77 symbols which were later revised to 59. He then taught this to family members and friends,” he said, adding that Dungle was also known as “The Scientist” by the older generation and acknowledged by the Encyclopedia of Iban Studies as a “brilliant mind.”

Though some of the symbols resembled ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, Dr Bromeley explained that Dungle's Alphabet symbols were

not pictographs, rather they were logo-phonetic characters, either syllabic or alphabetical in function.

“The most distinctive feature of Dungle's Alphabet is that it manages to capture all the sounds in the Iban language, which are symbolized in the forms of either logo-alphabetic or logo-syllabic characters,” he said.

He also informed that the Dungle's Alphabet had been placed under copyright protection as an intellectual property by IRDC.

To a question, he said there have been politicians who have enquired about the Dungle's Alphabet, but its sole custodian Bagat Nunui would rather let it to be thoroughly studied through academic research.

“University of Cambridge has shown interest in the research. However, should I pursue the research beyond Borneo, I hope to work with University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies,” he said.

Asked on his vision of the Alphabet, he hoped that it could be ultimately incorporated into the Iban language school syllabus.

“This is important so that this Iban intellectual heritage, the community's only known system of writing, can be preserved for many generations to come,” he said.



DR BROMELEY ... the researcher



DUNGLE GUNGGU ... the inventor