

# Webonary drives new dimension in preserving Kadazan language

**KOTA KINABALU:** As modernisation and the dominance of global languages increasingly influence how communities communicate, efforts to preserve ethnic languages are being intensified to ensure that cultural roots and local identities are not eroded.

For the Kadazan community, these efforts are now being strengthened through the development of the Kadazan-English-Malay Webonary, a digital dictionary that compiles a wealth of native vocabulary on an easily accessible platform.

The initiative, led by the Kadazandusun Language Foundation (KLF) in collaboration with various organisations, associations and local educational institutions, opens a new dimension in efforts to preserve and develop the ethnic language through a digital technology approach.

KLF chairman Datuk Philip Lasimbang said preserving one's mother tongue is not solely the responsibility of institutions, but requires collective commitment from the entire community, as the declining use of ethnic languages is becoming increasingly concerning.

"The level of proficiency in the Kadazan language is declining, and this calls for responsibility from all parties to defend it because when a language is lost, the people's identity is lost," he told Bernama.

The webonary, developed as a socio-cultural project to expand access to Kadazan vocabulary, compiles more than 30,000 Kadazan entries and nearly 29,000 Malay entries, marking a significant milestone in the digital development of indigenous lexicography.

The platform was launched by Deputy Chief Minister III Datuk Ewon Benedick in conjunction with International Mother Language Day in February.

Philip said the development of the digital dictionary is part of KLF's efforts to provide reference materials for higher education institutions, as well as to intensify translation work, given the limited availability of reference sources in the Kadazan language.

Over its 31 years of establishment, he said KLF has remained consistent in driving the development of local ethnic languages in Sabah, including contributing to the production of the Timugon Dictionary (Murut

language), which took 13 years to complete.

Among the Kadazan youth interviewed by Bernama, the Kadazan-English-Malay Webonary was described as a timely solution to address the lack of reference materials while helping preserve the uniqueness of their native dialects and vocabulary.

Civil servant Maklinus Antang, 43, from Kota Kinabalu said the digital dictionary represents a pragmatic approach to elevating Sabah's ethnic languages so that their linguistic heritage is not sidelined in the mainstream.

He said the platform also helps younger generations who are less proficient in speaking their mother tongue by providing a more systematic reference covering vocabulary, grammar and accurate pronunciation of the Kadazan language.

"In addition to learning from parents, the younger generation can now learn the Kadazan language through Webonary. This will ensure that the language remains relevant and is passed on to future generations," he said.

Maklinus also believes the platform opens opportunities for people from other ethnic groups to

learn about the uniqueness of the Kadazan language, while serving as a comprehensive reference for ethnic writers in selecting more accurate vocabulary when producing literary works.

Housewife Connie Fred Mojuli, 42, from Penampang said the provision of a multilingual dictionary is highly beneficial in helping younger generations learn Sabah's ethnic languages in a more systematic manner.

Being raised in a mixed Kadazan and Dusun family, Connie said the experience made her realise the importance of consistently using ethnic languages at home to ensure they remain part of family identity.

The mother of three also hopes the use of the Kadazan-English-Malay Webonary can be expanded to schools in Sabah to help students strengthen their mastery of ethnic vocabulary, while balancing the influence of other daily communication languages.

When launching the platform, Ewon said the webonary is not merely a repository of vocabulary but also serves as a living archive and an open learning space to ensure cultural continuity in the digital era. — Bernama