The Kelabit Language

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Introduction

- **Linguistic properties of Kelabit**

- **The sociolinguistic situation**

- **Documenting Kelabit**

- **Conclusion**

Linguistic Properties

Who?

- The Kelabit are one of the smallest **indigenous groups** in Sarawak and speak a language known as *karuh Kelabit* or *karuh tauh*.

- They traditionally lived in **longhouses** and practised **wet rice cultivation.**

- In recent years the community has undergone a number of changes – including **migration** to towns and cities

- This has had a big impact on **language use**…

Where?

- Kelabit is mainly spoken in the fourth and fifth divisions of **Northern Sarawak**, Malaysian Borneo.
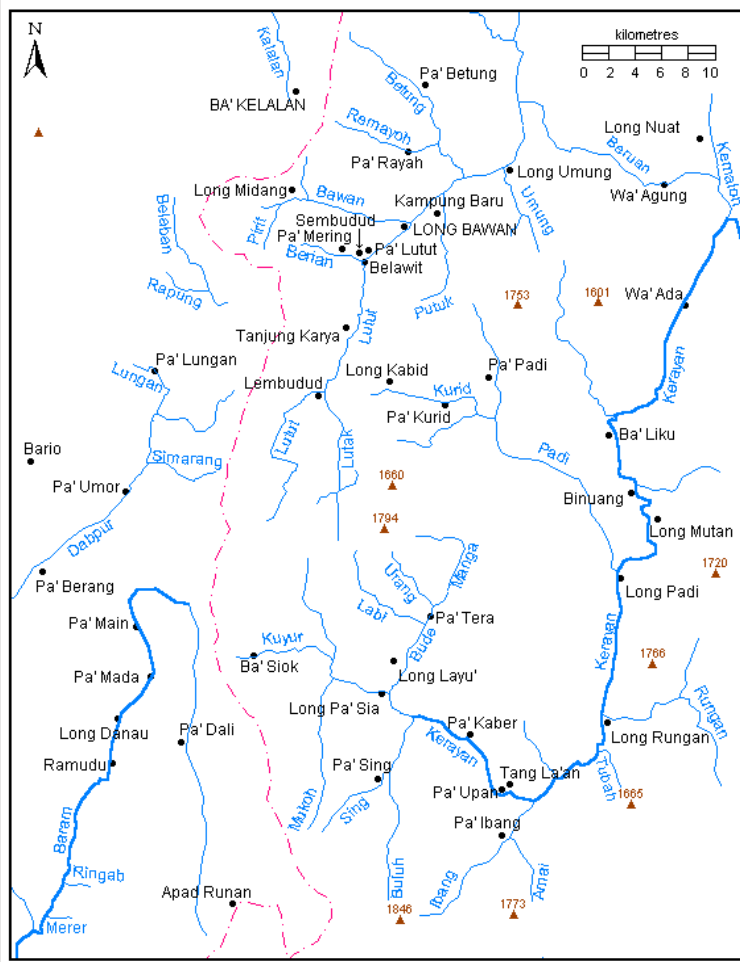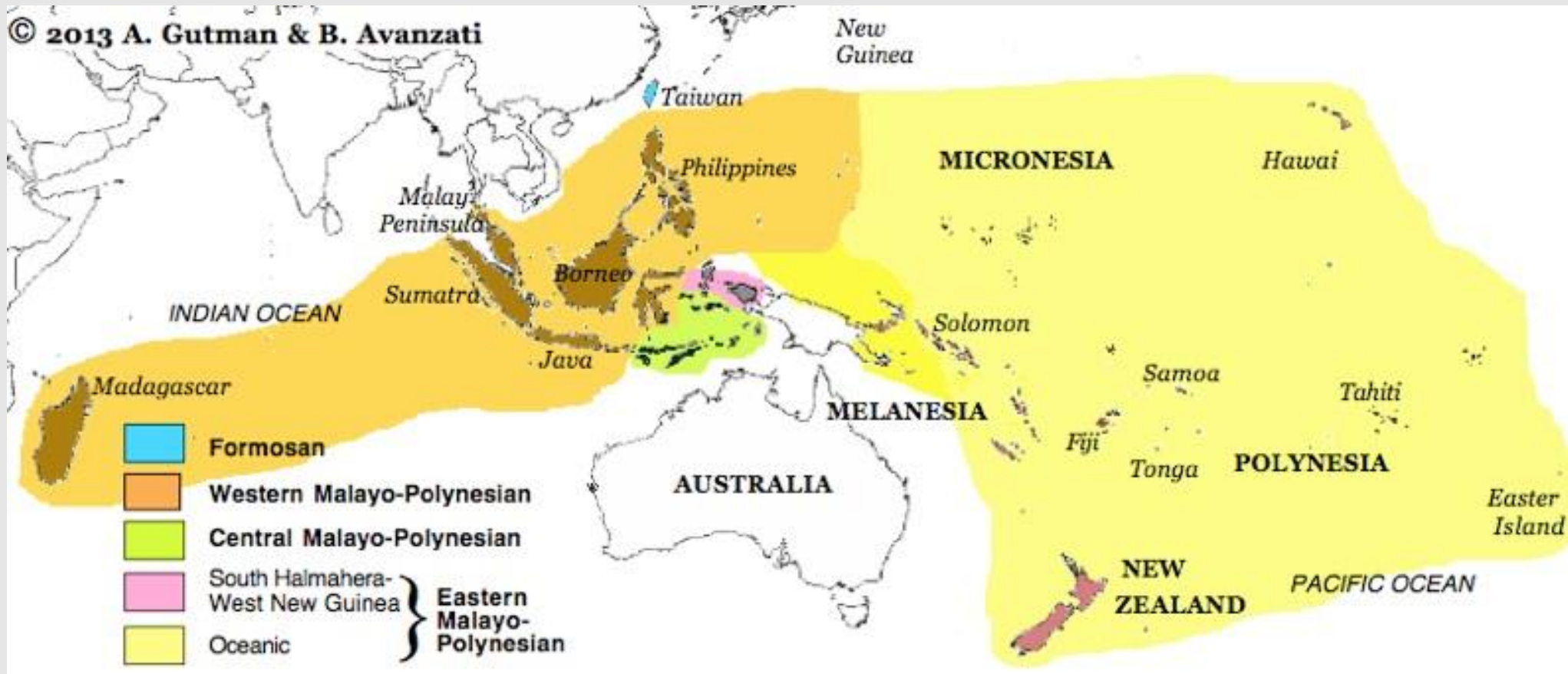
Where?

Image © Colin Davies

- Today there are **18 longhouse settlements** in and around the Highlands where different dialects of Kelabit are spoken

- The administrative centre is **Bario** where many villages were resettled after the confrontation with Indonesia.
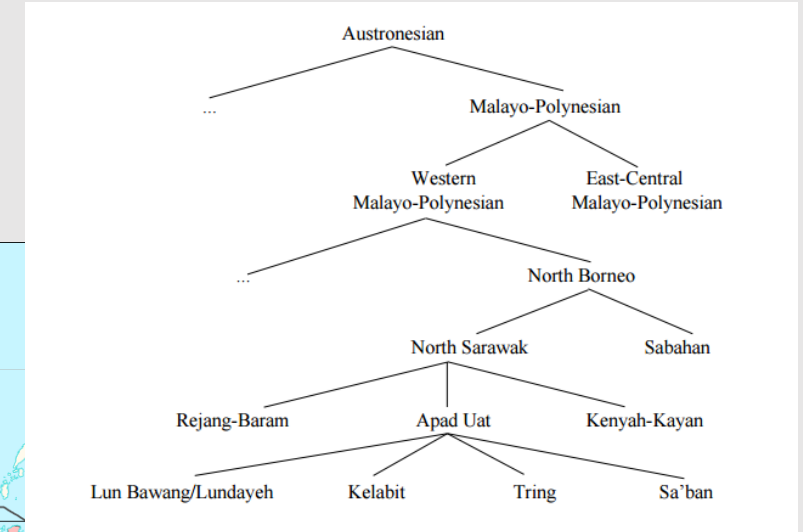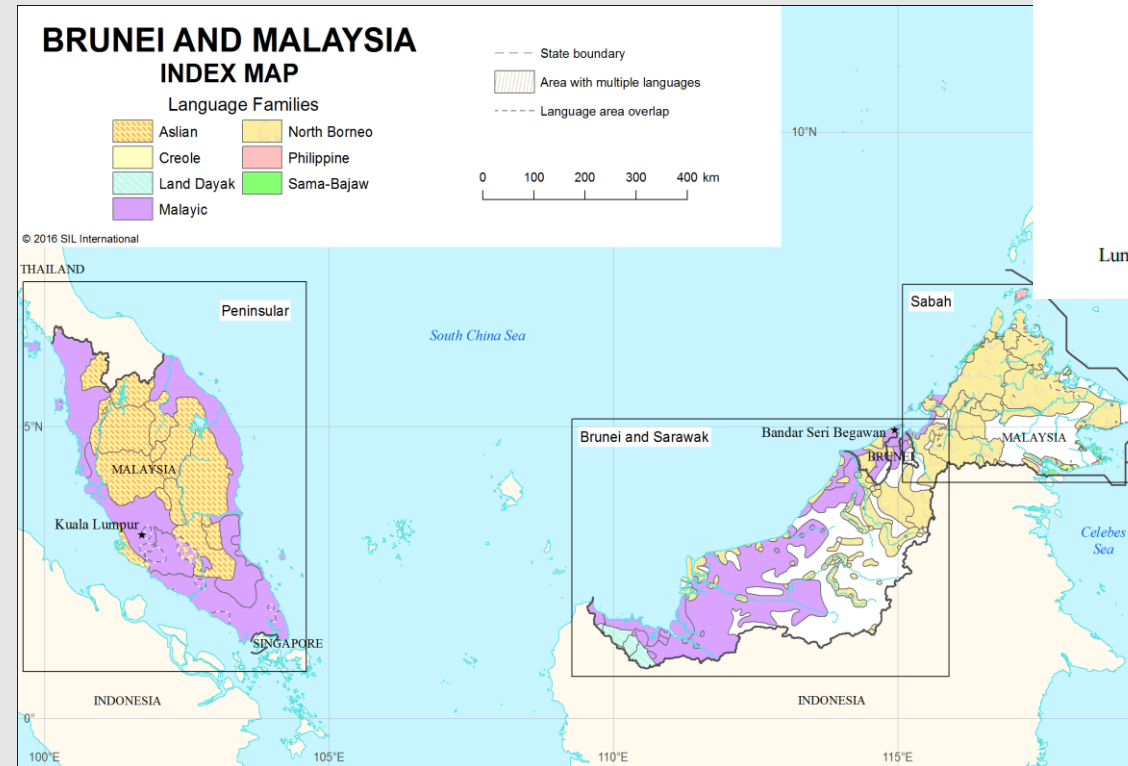
What?

- Kelabit is an **Austronesian** language and part of the **Western Malayo-Polynesian** subgroup

What?

- Kelabit is most closely related to Sa'ban, Lun Bawang/ Lundayeh and Tring: collectively the **Apad Uat** languages...

- Blust argues that the languages of Northern Sarawak and Sabah form a single subgroup of Western Malayo-Polynesian: **North Borneo**

Used by permission (Lewis et al 2016)

Inclusive/Exclusive Pronouns

English

	1	2	3
SINGULAR	I	you	he/she/it
PLURAL	we	you	they

Kelabit

	1.INCL	**1.EXCL**	**2**	**3**
SINGULAR	uih	n/a	iko	ieh
DUAL	kiteh	kediweh	meduweh	diweh
PAUCAL	teluh	keteluh	meteluh	deteluh
PLURAL	tauh	kamih	muyuh	ideh

Reduplication

(1) Derive Verbs from Nouns:

Noun	Verb
laput 'cloud'	**laput-laput** 'to be cloudy'
legku' 'thunder'	**legku'-legku'** 'to thunder'
bariu 'wind'	**bariu-bariu** 'to be windy'

(2) Mark Plural Number

Singular	Plural
na'an 'type'	**na'an-na'an** 'types'

(3) Imperfective aspect

Root	Imperfective
kiding 'lift'	**kiding-kiding** 'lift to no avail'
masiu 'sell'	**masiu-masiu** 'sell habitually'

Voice Alternations

(1a) **ACTIVE VOICE (ACT)**

I ate pineapple

(1b) **PASSIVE VOICE (PASS)**

The pineapple was eaten (by me)

Asymmetrical

Symmetrical

(2a) **ACTOR VOICE (AV)**

Ne-k**um**an   bua' kaber   uih

PFV-AV.eat   pineapple   1SG

'**I** ate pineapple'

(2b) **UNDERGOER VOICE (UV)**

K**in**an   kuh   neh   bua' kaber   ih

PFV.UV.eat   1SG   PT   pineapple   PT

'I ate **pineapple**'

Voiced Aspirates

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Palatal	Dorso-velar	glottal
Voiceless Plosives	p	t		k	ʔ
Voice Plosives	b	d		g	
Voiced Aspirates	bʰ	dʰ		gʰ	
Africates			dʒ		
Nasals	m	n		ŋ	
fricatives		s			h
liquids		l			
trills		r			
glides			j	w	

Phonemes, clusters or allophones? (Blust 2006)
- Clusters do not typically occur elsewhere
- Voiceless sounds are unaspirated
- They alternate with voiced sounds under suffixation
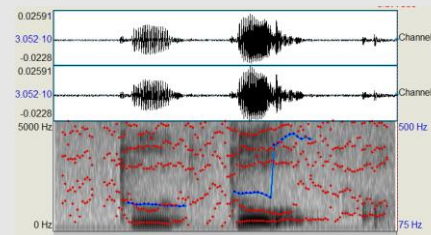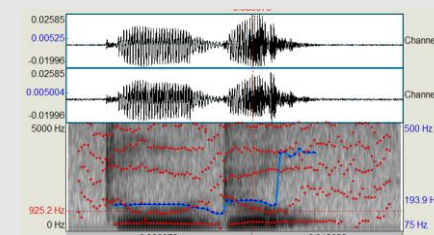- [dʰ] is realised as [s] in Kelapang Kelabit

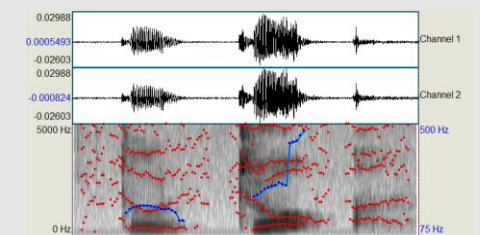[t]   *tutu'* [tutʊʔ] 'fall'

[d]   *tudu'* [tudʊʔ] 'seven'

[dʰ]   *tudtu'* [tudʰʊʔ] 'salt'

[t]   [d]   [dʰ]

Summary

- Kelabit is an Austronesian language spoken in Northern Sarawak

- It has many **typical Austronesian features** include a complex pronoun system; reduplication and a symmetrical voice system that are quite different from European languages.

- It also has a number of features that are **typologically rare** and possibly unique to Kelabit

- Hence, it is an invaluable resource in exploring the extent of **linguistic diversity** and **language universals**.

The Sociolinguistic Situation

The Languages of Malaysia (Lewis et al 2016)

- Malaysia has **138 living languages** and a Linguistic Diversity Index of 0.761 .

- **52 languages** are spoken in Sarawak.

- Apart from the national languages of **Malay**, **English** and **Mandarin**, very few have official status

- A great many languages are **endangered** and most are **under-documented**:

STATUS OF MALAYSIA'S 138 LIVING LANGUAGES	
Institutional	**11**
Developing	**6**
Vigorous	**5**
In trouble	**101**
Dying	**15**

Kelabit

- The Ethnologue lists Kelabit as being EGIDS level **6b (Threatened)** - this means it is still used among those of **child-bearing age** but not always transmitted to the **next generation**.

KELABIT IN TOWN

KELABIT IN THE HIGHLANDS

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERNCES

(Rethinasamy et al 2013, Martin & Yen 1994)

Speakers

- The total Kelabit population is listed as **5,900** in the Sarawak 2010 census – but perhaps more like **6,500** if we allow for population growth outside of Sarawak.

- **But how many people speak the language?**

- The population in the Highlands (where Kelabit is relatively vibrant) is perhaps only **1,200** – 1/5 of the total population.

- Speakers are multilingual – most speak Kelabit, Malay, English and local languages…

David speaks Kelabit, Malay, English, Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, Lun Bawang and Iban

Domains

- When do multilingual speakers use Kelabit?

HIGHLANDS	TOWN
- Language of **daily communication** – at home, at the town centre, at the airport etc. - It can also be used in **formal functions** – i.e. at *irau* or feasts and in church - Malay is the language of education.	- Kelabit is used in conversations among groups of Kelabit friends but... **Intergenerational transmission is declining** - Speakers often **code-switch** or use English/Malay in multi-ethnic group settings.

Previous Documentation

- There are very few references on Kelabit or any of the Apad Uat languages – and **few full descriptive works** (see Asmah 1983, Clayre on Sa'ban and Blust on Kelabit).

- The earliest resources are **word lists** collected by travellers, missionaries and government officers – e.g. de Crespigny (1896), Roth (1896), Douglas (1911) and Ray (1913).

- There are two short **glossaries** (Amster 1995, Blust 1993)

- And a few **stories**/greetings in anthropological works (Rubenstein (1973), Saging & Bulan (1989), Bala (2002)
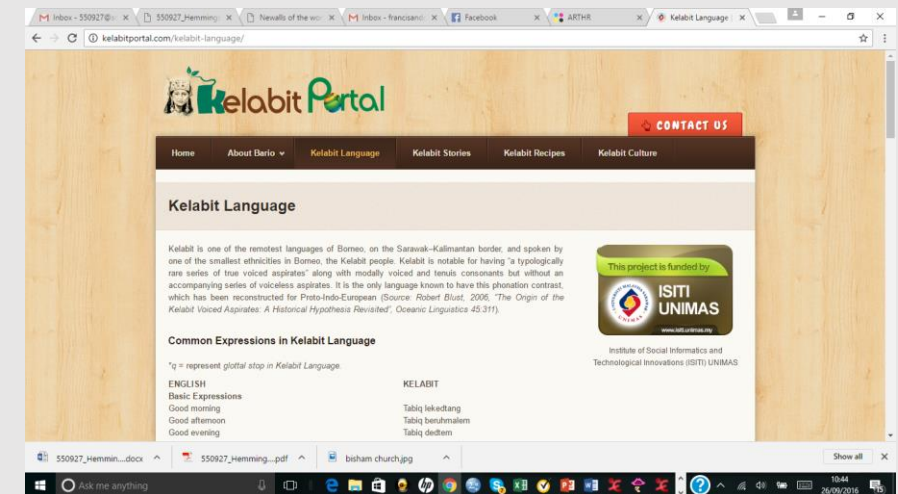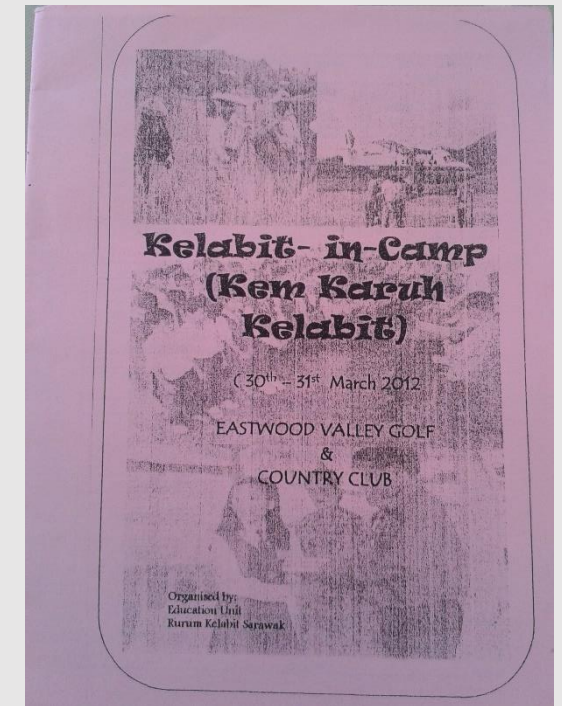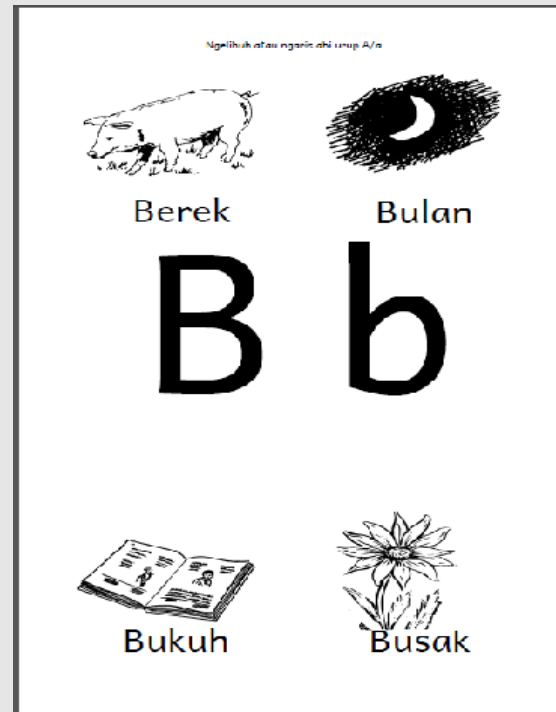
Revitalisation

- There have been a number of community efforts to **revitalise Kelabit** – particularly in towns.

RADIO BARIO

TAWA' RAUT

KELABIT CAMPS

Challenges

- **Resources and manpower**!

- **Orthography**

⟨'⟩ rera'
   kemu'

The big question: What to do with the glottal stop?

(1a) [rəraʔ] 'ant'   (2a) [kəmʊh] 'you said'
(1b) [rərak] 'torn'   (2b) [kəmʊʔ] 'short'

ʔ

⟨q⟩ reraq
   kemuq

Summary

- Kelabit can be considered **endangered** as speakers - particularly in towns - are shifting from Kelabit to Malay, English and other local languages and using Kelabit in fewer domains.

- Nonetheless, speakers have **positive attitudes** towards the language as a symbol of Kelabit identity and are keen to maintain its use.

- Revitalisation efforts are ongoing but face challenges of **disagreement over orthography** and lack of resources/support

- This is another way in which documentation can help!

Documenting Kelabit

Language Documentation

- **Language documentation** is generally understood as:

"a **representative and lasting multipurpose record** of a natural language or one of its varieties" (Himmelmann 1998)	"the **creation**, **annotation**, **preservation** and **dissemination** of transparent records of a language" (Woodbury 2011)

- The sample collected will depend on the **aims of the project**!

What is collected?

Primary Data

- ❖ Audio recordings
- ❖ Video recordings
- ❖ Images
- ❖ Written texts

Audio Recorder etc.

Annotation

- ❖ Transcriptions
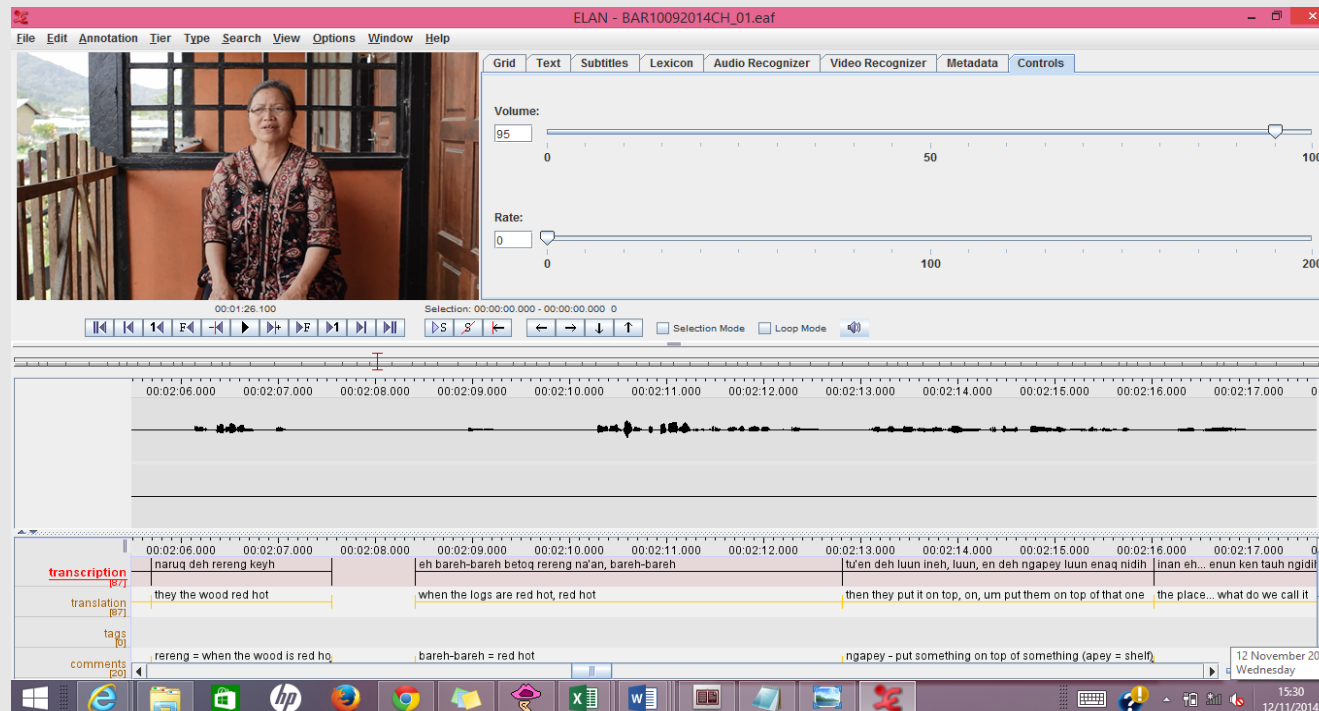- ❖ Translations
- ❖ Analysis of data

ELAN

Metadata

- ❖ Info about recording session
- ❖ Info about speaker(s)

EXCEL

Documenting Kelabit

- The corpus includes **audio and video recordings** of Kelabit, collected in **Bario**, **Pa' Dalih** and **Pa' Umur** over six and a half months of PhD fieldwork in 2013 and 2014.

- A variety of genres were collected, including **elicitation** and **naturalistic texts**.

- The recordings were transcribed using a working orthography and translated into English in **ELAN**.

Naturalistic Texts

- Roughly **7 hours of naturalistic texts**: personal narratives; folk stories; procedural texts; news reports; formal speeches and songs

**A children's rhyme**

A children's story

A personal history

Elicitation

- Roughly **30 hours of elicitation sessions**: using word-list translation/ linguistic stimuli, eliciting example sentences from words, eliciting grammaticality judgements and using non-linguistic stimuli

- Data from both naturalistic text and elicitation was used in a **basic sketch grammar** and in more detailed research into the voice system

- The next steps: (1) **archiving** the materials & producing useful **community outputs** and (2) expanding the description to produce a **full reference grammar**.
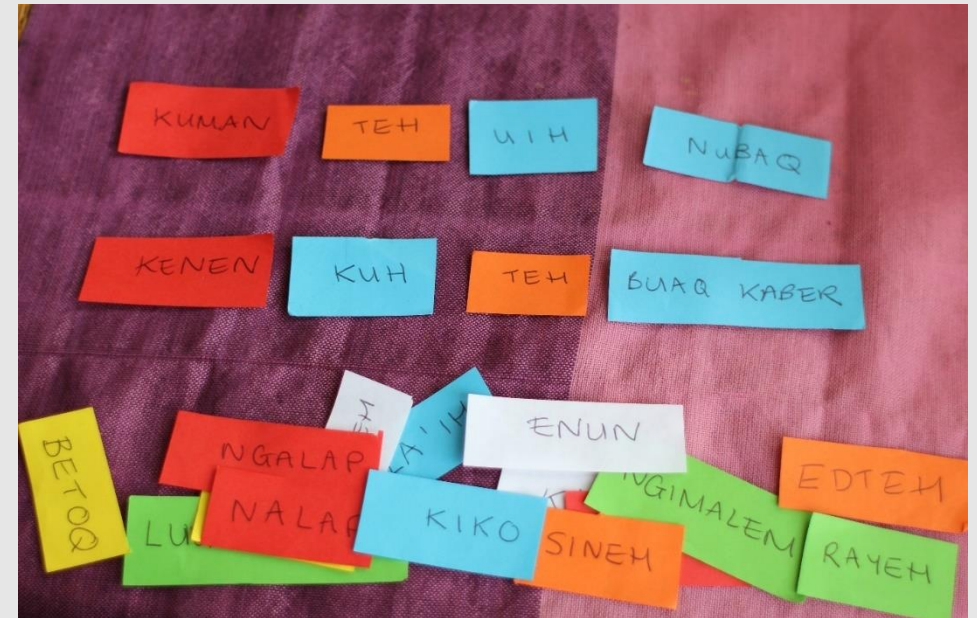
Summary

- The Kelabit documentation project involves the collection and archiving of **primary materials** in the Kelabit language.

- These are **annotated** in various ways to "add value" – transcription, translation, gloss, cultural information etc.

- Both structured elicitation and naturalistic data fed into a **description** of the language and more detailed analysis of **voice**.

- It is hoped that future documentation and description can feed into both **revitalisation** efforts in the community and increased understanding of **variation in Austronesian**.

Conclusion

Conclusion

- Kelabit – like many indigenous languages around the world – is facing endangerment in the context of **increased migration** and **urban language shift.**

- Nonetheless, it has an important **identity function** for the local community.

- It also has a number of interesting linguistic features which may feed into ongoing **typological** and **theoretical linguistic debates**.

- Thus it is important for linguists and local communities to **document and describe** in order to provide a record for posterity, support revitalisation and reveal interesting patterns to test and improve existing hypotheses and provide data for new linguistic research.

Many Thanks!