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Championing Kristang

Many of the world's minority languages and dialects are in danger of disappearing and a retired teacher talks to Yong Tiam Kui about her concerns for Kristang, the Malacca Portuguese creole.

- There are about 21,000 Eurasians of various descent in the country.
- Few speak Kristang and most Malaysian and Singaporean Eurasians find it difficult to accept that Kristang was once the 'mother tongue' of their community.
- Kristang as spoken today is a 'left-over' of the Portuguest creole vocabulary and grammar of the 1900s with influence from English, Peranakan Malay, Bazaar Malay, Bahasa Malaysia, Hokkien and Tamil.

It is close to becoming extinct. Kristang, the Malacca-Portuguese creole that was already in its death throes in the 1960s. Now, only a few households in the Portuguese Settlement of Malacca speak it regularly.

The situation is clearly grim but there is still a glimmer of hope. Since Joan Margaret Marbeck's first book, *Ungua Adanza*, was released in 1995, the Malacca-Portuguese community has woken up to the fact that it is in danger of losing their mother tongue.

"When I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s, I used to hear my mum, my grandmother and my aunts converse in Kristang," recalls Marbeck.

"But, we were not encouraged to speak Kristang. We were told that if you want to get on in this world, you have to speak English. It survived as a secret language. The elders would use it to talk about something scandalous or humourously vulgar that they didn't want the young to know. They would speak Kristang when they didn't want the other races to understand what they were saying.

"Since my first book came out, people in the Portuguese Settlement have become very conscious about keeping the language."

Ungua Adanza, which is Kristang for "an inheritance", features memories of Marbeck's childhood, humorous and nostalgic poems, situational monologues, idiomatic expression, a repertoire of traditional songs and a glossary of some 800 Kristang words. All 2,000 copies printed were sold and this was quite a feat considering there are only some 21,000 Eurasians of various descent in the country.

Marbeck, who taught music at Canossa Convent at the Portuguese Settlement, woke up to her Kristang deficiency in 1990 when a BBC reporter asked her to say a few words.

"A BBC reporter who was doing a feature on Malacca asked me to say a few words in Kristang. I couldn't utter a word. I understood Kristang perfectly but I couldn't even count from one to 10. That's what spurred me on. I thought, oh my God! I better do something."

With the encouragement of Dr Pierre F.G. Gulsan of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, who was in Malacca to do research for his Master's thesis in contact languages (peculiarities that

languages form in contact with other languages), Marbeck set out to do research for a book about Kristang. She would sit in the village coffeeshop in the Portuguese Settlement and talk with the people. I would chat with the people, make friends and ask them things like, ‘so how was your catch today?’”

In 1992, Marbeck sought the aid of American linguist Graham Turgood who was lecturing at University Kebangsaan Malaysia, to develop an orthography for Kristang which never had a written form.

“I had to find an orthographer to create a phonetic system for Kristang and I wanted it to be as close to Bahasa Malaysia as possible.”

Marbeck says her second book, *Linggu Mai*, which comes with a phrase book and a Kristang speech and CD song, is intended to serve as a Kristang reader and for learning the language. *Linggu Mai* features poems and short articles with titles such as *Bela-bela Jugadera* (Gambling Grandmothers), *Ceru-ceru Kristang* (Kristang Smells), *Unga Stori Rainya* (a Kristang tale about a tiger and a mousedeer) and *Kumih Tantu* (Eating a lot).

“My first book *Ungua Adanza* featured 700 to 800 Kristang words. It’s an incomplete list. That’s why I wrote my second book. *Linggu Mai* features a Kristang-English, English-Kristang dictionary with 1,000 Kristang words. It is for the enjoyment of those who know the culture well and those who are curious for an insight into the heritage and language lifestyle of the Kristang community. The book is intended to help preserve the Kristang language and incidentally also exposes the simple, humourous and happy lifestyle of the Kristang community,” she says.

Marbeck says she wrote *Linggu Mai* as a Kristang keepsake for her children and the Kristang community and hopes it will help to establish Kristang as the mother tongue of the country’s diverse Eurasian community.

“The Kristang language as spoken today is best described as a ‘left-over’ of the simple and limited Portuguese Creole vocabulary and grammar of the 1900s with a continuous evolving structural influence of English, Pearanakan Malay, Bazaar Malay, Bahasa Malaysia, Hokkien and Tamil. *Linggu Mai* hopes to establish this language of our forefathers in the hearts of all who treasure their unique beginnings that stemmed from the once great port of Malacca.”

Marbeck is appealing to those interested in languages to sponsor the *Linggu Mai* package as many people in the Portuguese Settlement cannot afford it.

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