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UMS to champion research on Borneo's ethnic languages

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KOTA KINABALU: A Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) delegation has stepped forward to champion research on Borneo's ethnic languages through its participation in the 12th International Seminar on Linguistics and the Cultivation of the Malay Languages (SALPBM XII) recently.

The event was held from April 15 and 16 at the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication.

The delegation was led by Associate Professor Dr Jane Wong Kon Ling and Dr Mohd Juhar Harun, alongside 10 postgraduate students from UMS' Institute of Borneo Indigenous Studies (BorIIS).

All participants presented research focusing on the linguistics of Sabah's ethnic communities, particularly issues surrounding the sustainability of mother tongues and the threat of local language extinction.

Among the topics highlighted were the use of ethnic languages among younger generations, the sociolinguistic dynamics of mixed marriages, the vitality of Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, Murut and other languages, as well as language transmission within mixed families. These studies emphasised that mother tongues are cultural assets facing pressure from globalisation,

urbanisation and the dominance of majority languages.

Associate Professor Dr Jane Wong stated that UMS' participation in SALPBM XII represents a strategic effort to position mother tongues as a core of knowledge, identity and civilisation.

"Mother tongues are the lifeblood of heritage that shapes a community's identity. Through international platforms such as SALPBM, we are able to enrich the body of knowledge and build broader collaborative networks," she said.

Dr Mohd Juhar, meanwhile, reaffirmed UMS's commitment to the sustainability of Sabah's ethnic languages through the active involvement of BorIIS postgraduate students.

"Research on mother tongues is not merely linguistic documentation but an effort to ensure that cultural heritage continues to thrive. The presence of students on the international stage demonstrates their readiness to shoulder both academic and cultural responsibilities," he said.

The seminar also featured a keynote address by Sabah's assistant Local Government and Housing Minister, Datuk Dr Maijol Mahap, who stressed the need to strengthen both the Malay language and mother tongues as foundations for unity

and societal development.

A second keynote was delivered by Sabah's Institute for Development Studies (IDS) chief executive officer, Professor Datuk Dr Ramzah Dambul, who highlighted the strategic role of language in policy and regional identity.

BorIIS postgraduate students also contributed significant findings, including Johan Severinus Tati, who presented research on the Tatana language.

"The Tatana language faces serious challenges if not preserved systematically. It is not merely a means of communication, but the root of identity," he said.

Another student, Helena Sangau, underscored the challenges of language transmission in Dusun-Murut mixed families.

"The dominance of majority languages often leads to the erosion of mother tongues. Support from education policy and family awareness is crucial," she explained.

SALPBM XII is organised by the UPM's faculty of Modern Languages and Communication together with Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

The event brought together scholars from within and beyond the country to discuss the future of the Malay language and mother tongues in the digital era.



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SUMMARIES

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