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The Guardian of the Malay Language

September 20, 2011

[My article below was published on 19th September 2011 in my regular column, The Golden Legacy on The Brunei Times. This is an update of an earlier article I wrote in 2009 which is currently in my third book 'Our Brunei Heritage' which can be found in Best Eastern bookshops.]

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Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka -- Guardian of the Malay Language --

It is not known when the Malay Language was first used in Brunei. In 644 AD, the definition Malay appeared in Chinese writings as 'Mo-Le-Yeu' when Chinese history recorded that the Malays had sent a tribute to the Emperor of China. Historians agree that 'old Malay' or ancient Malay was used extensively with Sanskrit before the mid-15th century when Malay became more widespread and used to spread Islam.

In Brunei, the Malay language was used extensively during the early days of the Sultanate. But it was not until 1906 when Brunei Darussalam started to use Malay officially in the education system. It was 50 years later that the usage of the language got a boost.

The status of the Malay Language was enhanced with the enactment of the Brunei Darussalam Constitution on 29 September 1959. Section 82(1) of the Constitution officially stated that the Malay Language shall become Brunei Darussalam's official language.

In April 1960, one proposal was tabled in the State Legislative Council for an independent agency to be formed to ensure the usage of the Malay Language as the official language of the country.



In 1962, another campaign, the National Language Month or Bulan Bahasa Kebangsaan was launched similar to the Language Week but with all the districts involved. Similar activities were held throughout the other districts.

The National Language Declaration which was declared by everyone in the country on 23 July 1962 was the highlight of the event.

The State Secretariat's circular of 36/1962 dated 28 June 1962 officially stated the use of the Malay language in the government. Further circulars of 8/1960, 52/1963, 38/1964, 26/1965 and 22/1981 all ensured that the Malay language shall be used throughout the government departments.

Meetings were held with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce regarding the use of the Malay language on 16 May 1963 and on 30 May 1964. Banks were also engaged with a similar meeting in April 1965. The wide usage of the businesses' signboards of the Malay Language both in the roman and jawi alphabets marked the success of the Malay language used by both the government and the private sector.

On 1 January 1965, the Language and Literary Section was taken out of the Education Department to become Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka a full-fledged department in its own right.

The main focus of the Language and Literature Bureau remains the same which guaranteed the placement and importance of the Malay language to its rightful place as the basis of Bruneian culture and identity. Its main focus is to become a knowledge centre that has the ability to increase the prestige of the national language, literature and the cultural values of the country.

By June 1966, the Bureau published its first journal 'Bahana'; in May 1967, its second journal 'Beriga' and four months later, its first children's journal 'Mekar.'

The number of staff increased throughout the years. In 1961, there were 2 and by 1965, 30 people, 1970 - 67 people, 1980 - 92 people, by 1985 exceeded 200 and by 1990s up to now, the staff number had exceeded 300.

The foundation stone of the main \$2.6 million Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka building at Jalan Elizabeth II was laid by His Majesty Sultan

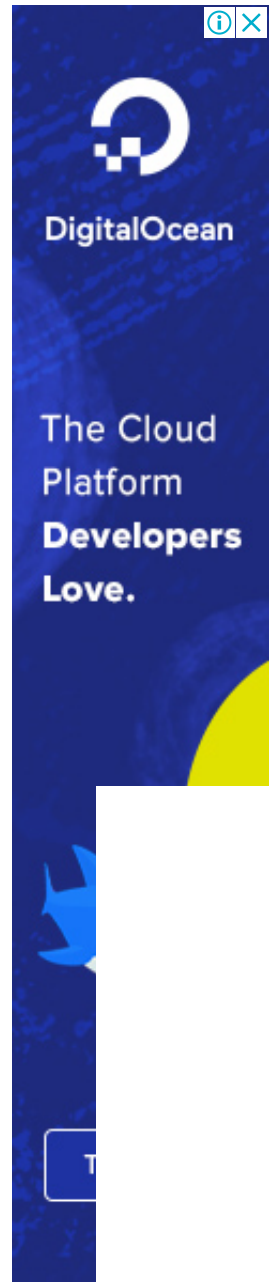
In 1961, the government formed the Language Board (Lembaga Bahasa) which was administratively placed under the Education Department. The Board's name was later changed to the Language and Literary Section. Haji Awang Mohd Jamil (now Pehin Dato Dr Haji Mohd Jamil) became the Language Board's first Director.



The Board's Language Week project started in 1961 ensured the usage of the Malay language. Throughout the Language Week, a number of programs were run such as lectures, books exhibition, posters, oratory competition, debate competition, poetry recital competition, writing competition as well as singing competition, all in the Malay language.

A procession was held in the capital city, Bandar Brunei, made up of school children and government departments, each team carrying banners displaying slogans such as 'Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa' and 'Hidup Bahasa Hiduplah Bangsa.' A special song was composed by Awang Besar Sagap with lyrics written by Yura Halim, both of whom were responsible for the Brunei national anthem.

From 1962 onwards, the government issued several circulars. The circulars issued by the State Secretariat (Pejabat Setiausaha Kerajaan) ensured the usage of the Malay Language officially throughout the government. The first circular SUK 30/1962 outlined the main task of the Board which was to carry out the content of Section 82(1) of the Brunei Darussalam Constitution.



Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin on 28 September 1965. It was declared opened on 29 September 1968 with the main library opened to the public two months later.

The first mobile library service was launched in August 1970 to Kampung Sengkurong and later on to Tutong District. However it was not until 1971 that books were lent to the public from the main library.

By 1975, two more libraries were opened in Kuala Belait and Tutong, in 1976 in Seria and in 1978 in Bangar, Temburong. During the 8th National Development Plan, more libraries were opened in Muara, Pandan, Lambak Kanan and Sengkurong. The mobile library services continued throughout the years to serve many communities throughout the country.

On 29 September 1989, the then Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, laid the foundation stone for the Bureau's new headquarters in the Old Airport Government Complex. The \$11 million building was used from 1992. The old building at Jalan Elizabeth II remained as the main national library. A new National Library is currently being envisaged to be built.

Today, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka is responsible for language and literary development and propagation, cultural research and documentation and book publication besides to provide library services to all over the country.

The bureau has contributed consistently to the Malay Language development through its numerous activities. Workshops such as Jawi writing promote the development of the Jawi system. Storytelling competitions such as Mari Bercerita helps to generate reading culture among the Bruneian youths in Malay.

Apart from conducting competitions, the Bureau plays a crucial role as a publishing institution in Brunei of various forms of writing, from children's novels to poetry and cookery books.

The bureau continues to offer its services by providing Jawi translations of posters or billboards free of charge; translating texts from English to Malay; and to offer guidance and advice regarding the national language.

The bureau also fosters a close relationship with regional and international associations and similar institutions.

In its 50 year of existence, the Language and Literature Bureau played a crucial role in the development of the Malay nation and Brunei Darussalam.

Indeed, during the Golden Jubilee celebrations on 17 September 2011, His Majesty The Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam while urging that the sovereignty of the Malay Language must not be slackened, but upheld so as not to become a second-class language; was pleased to note that the Language and Literature Bureau has stood as an institution entrusted with building and developing the Malay Language in Brunei Darussalam over the past 50 years.

18th September 2011



Anonymous said...

Quite agree about protecting malay language. But what about our Brunei malay language? It is slowly disappearing. Should not we be concern?

Currently emphasis on "standard" malay has knock-on effect to our heritage. Brunei malay language distinguish our nation from the rest of malay speaking nation.

I believe that the country must use Brunei malay language first before any other language. Our mass media should be push into using our Brunei malay language as their medium of communication.

Wednesday, September 21, 2011 10:36:00 PM



aina azwena said...

looks interesting history of brunei but i didn't read at all# aku inda paham

Wednesday, February 15, 2017 2:21:00 PM

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