

# ETHNOLINGUISTIC NOTES ON THE LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT STATUS OF MINTIL, AN ASLIAN LANGUAGE OF MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

The Mintil language is considered one of Malaysia's most endangered languages. The language is a linguistically distinct member of the Menraq-Batek branch of the Northern Aslian language family. It is still spoken by around 400 people who refer to themselves as "Batek Mayah". The previously assessed language endangerment status of Mintil as being 'moribund' is based on limited information. This paper reviews the history of the Mayah over the past century and presents research on the present endangerment status of Mintil. Based on this, I assert that the status of the Mintil language is stable since it continues to be spoken by almost all adults in the three established villages and it is also being passed on to children in that speech community. Nevertheless, the small number of speakers and the lack of official recognition mean that the language cannot be considered safe.

**Keywords:** endangered languages, language situation, Aslian languages

**ISO 639-3 codes:** btq, mzt, mnq

## 1 Introduction

The United Nations has declared 2019 to be the International Year of Indigenous Languages.<sup>1</sup> This is in recognition of the fact that, while languages are an important hallmark of a culture's identity, indigenous languages are being lost at an unprecedented rate. Around nine languages die per year, with most in Asia (Simons 2019).

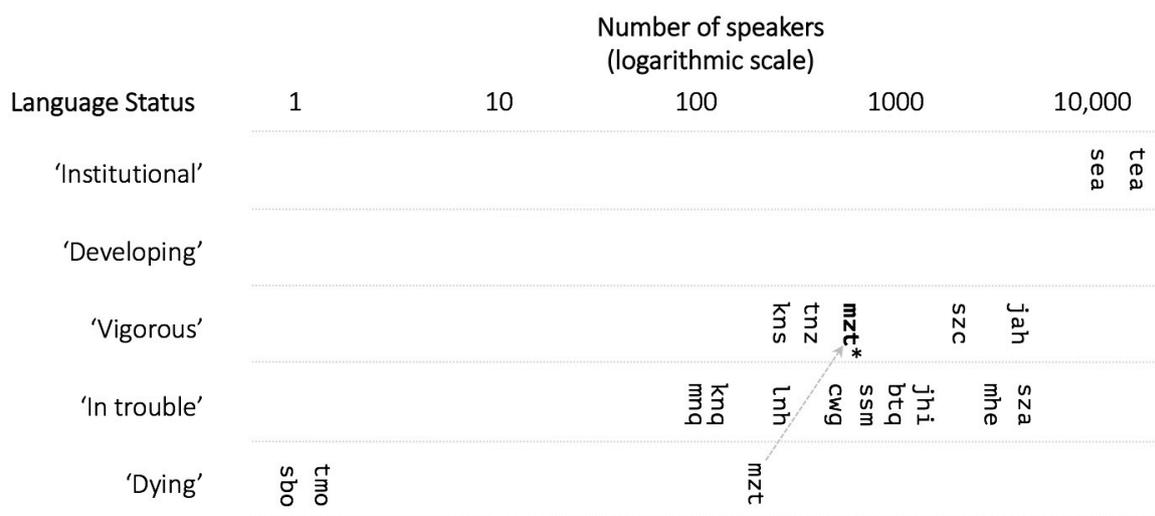
One group of endangered languages is the Aslian languages, including some 20 Austroasiatic languages spoken by the Orang Asli of the Malay Peninsula (cf. Benjamin 2012, Benjamin 2016, etc.). According to the *Ethnologue* evaluation against the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) standard (Eberhard et al. 2019), some twelve of these languages are considered 'in trouble' or 'dying' due to inter-generational transmission being in the process of being broken (Figure 1). Of these, three languages are of particular concern: Sabüm (sbo), which is probably extinct (Benjamin 2012); Temoq (tmo), which probably has fewer than 100 speakers (Laird 2016); and Mintil (mzt), which is labelled 'moribund', where "the only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older" (Eberhard et al. 2019).

There is particular uncertainty regarding the language endangerment status of Mintil, a Northern Aslian language that Benjamin (1985b) describes as being particularly "rare and elusive" as well as being linguistically distinct, as the only Orang Asli language that has diphthongal vowels in syllables closed by stop consonants (Benjamin 1985b).

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 71/178, 19 December 2016.

**Figure 1:** Status of the Mintil language as assessed by the present study (mzt\*) compared with the assessment of Aslian languages by Eberhard et al. (2019).



Note: Language names follow ISO 639-3:- btq: Batek, cwg: Cheq Wong, jah: Jah Hut, jhi: Jehai, kns: Kensiu, knq: Kintaq, lnh: Lanoh, mhe: Mah Meri, mnq: Menriq, mzt: Mintil, sbo: Sabüm, sea: Semai, szc: Semaq Beri, sza: Semelai, ssm: Semnam, tea: Temiar, tmo: Temoq, tnz: Tonga.

Source: Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Eberhard et al. 2019).

The *Ethnologue's* evaluation shows that, while a 2005 reference noted 180 speakers in three villages, there may no longer be any speakers remaining (Eberhard et al. 2019). A United Nations assessment (Bradley 2010) considers “Mintil” to be a dialect of Batek (btq), rating the Batek language itself as “Critically Endangered”, with the criteria for this rating being that “the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently”. Partly due to disagreements on the use of the term “Mintil”, Lye (2013) notes that only fragmentary information is available on the speakers of the language, their territory is missing from recent maps, and their language is not included in recent language reclassifications (Dunn et al. 2011).

In order to address the uncertainty regarding the status of Mintil, I carried out a revised evaluation of the language against the EGIDS standard. The evaluation was based on (a) a review of the literature on the Mintil language and (b) a survey of settlements where Mintil is still spoken.

## 2 Research methodology

The literature review examined the ethnographic and linguistic literature on Mintil speakers and their language and included a particular focus on references to (i) their ethnolinguistic identity, (ii) their geographical distribution, and (iii) their linguistic affiliation. The field survey (carried out between August 2012 and April 2019) included visits to all villages where Mintil was purported to be spoken. I recorded coordinates of the location and carried out focus-group discussions regarding (i) the name of the village and their ethnolinguistic identity, (ii) the geographical extent of their territories, (iii) the population of the village, and (iv) use of the Mintil language, including transmission to children.

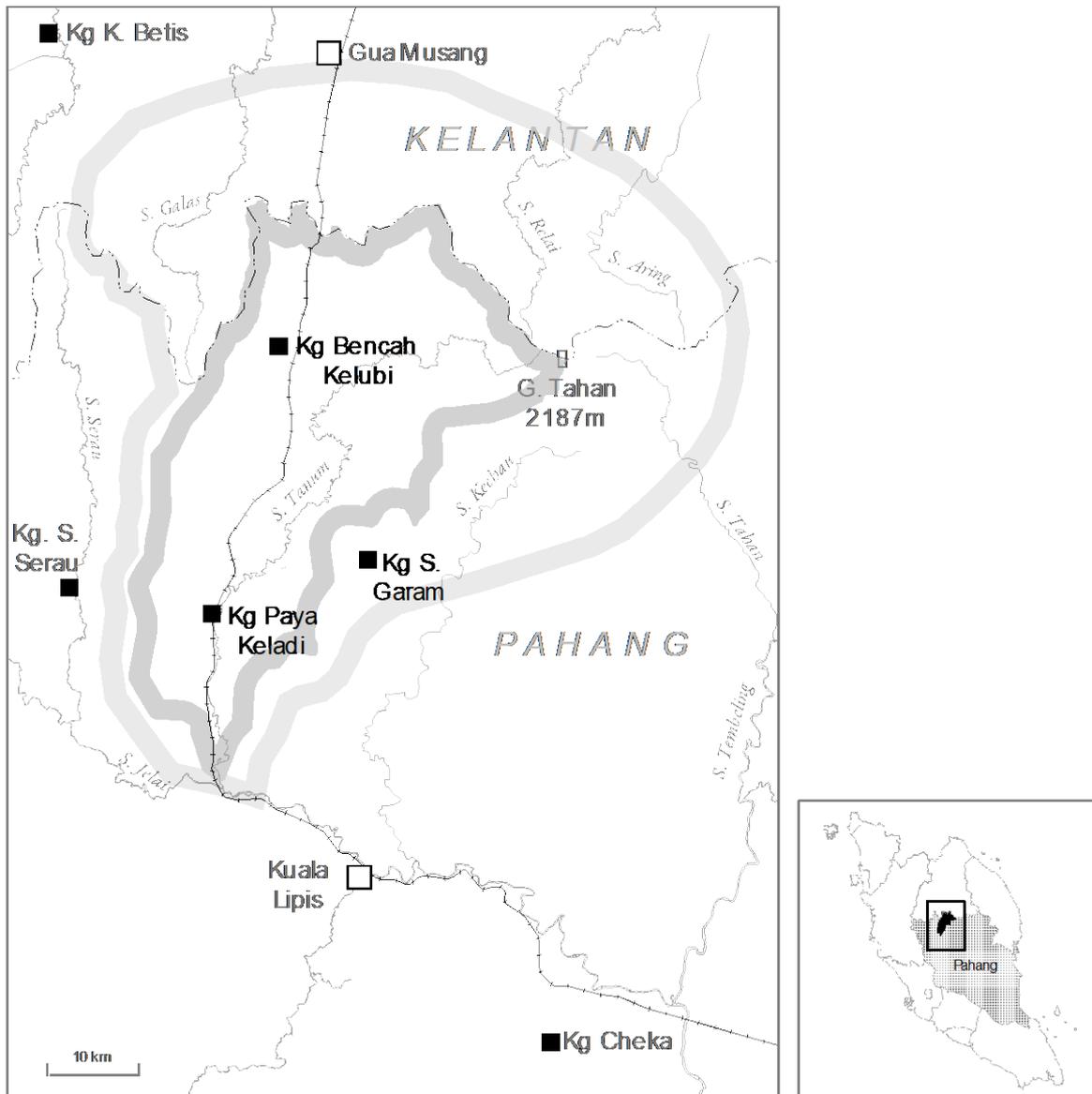
I analysed the results of the survey regarding the number of speakers and intergenerational transmission using the EGIDS standard (Eberhard et al. 2019). The key criteria for the analysis were (i) whether the language was used for face-to-face communication by all generations and (ii) whether the number of speakers was stable or declining.

### 3 Review of Mintil Language Background

#### 3.1 The ethnolinguistic identity of Mintil speakers

*Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al. 2019) gives the location of Mintil speakers as three villages on the “Tamun”<sup>2</sup> river in Peninsular Malaysia. This river is officially named the Sungai Tanum<sup>3</sup>, with the Aslian spelling given as Tanim (Benjamin 2012).<sup>4</sup> The Tanum valley is in the state of Pahang, on the border with the state of Kelantan. The river runs from near the summit of the Peninsula’s highest mountain, Gunung Tahan (2187 meters above sea level), down to the Sungai Jelai, a tributary of the Sungai Pahang (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** The three government-built villages of the Mayah (black captions) and the approximate extent of their traditional territories (outer light-grey ring) compared with the borders of the Tanum valley (inner dark-grey ring; black in key map, right).



An early account of the people of the Tanum valley comes from the colonial explorer, Grant Carveth Wells (1923, 1925). In 1914, while carrying out a survey for the Tumpat railway line (shown on Figure 2), Wells encountered people living in the forested interior. Wells referred to these people as “Semang”, a

<sup>2</sup> This is a spelling error.

<sup>3</sup> The word *sungai* is Malay for ‘river’; the local word is *təm* (e.g. Təm Tanim).

<sup>4</sup> The name of the river is alternatively given as Tenom (von Cuylenberg 1898) and Tanom (Evans 1937); it may also be pronounced as *Tanum* (G. Benjamin pers. comm., 8 June 2019).

generic term that is used for the indigenous people of the Peninsula who traditionally follow a predominantly hunter-gather lifestyle. This group is also referred to as “Negrito” and “Menraq” (Lye 2001). Wells noted that the local Malays, who lived on the banks of the main river, referred to the Semang as *orang hutan* ‘forest people’. Since this account by Wells, there have been around ten ethnonyms used for these people (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Names used to refer to the speakers of the Mintil language

<b>Name</b>	<b>References</b>
Menri	Schebesta (1929)
Menraq	Williams-Hunt (1952), also “Negrito”
Mendriq	‘government’ (Diffloth 1975, Benjamin 1976: 47)
Mintil (Mt)	Diffloth (1975), Benjamin (1976, 1983, 2012, 2016), Dunn (2011)
Batek Blokka	van der Schott (1986) [Malay <i>belukar</i> ‘secondary forest’]
Batek Tanum	Lye (1997, 2004, 2013), Tacey & Riboli (2014), Kruspe et al. (2015)*
Mintil (mzt)	ISO 639-3:2007
Batek Tanim	Benjamin (2012) [Tanum]
Orang Maia	Tacey (2016);

\*Kruspe et al. (2015) consider Mintil (“Batek Tanum”) to be a dialect of Batek/Bateg/Bateq (btq).

Wells described his first encounter with a man from the Tanum who was “about four feet, six inches [137 cm] in height, almost black, with woolly hair, and very muscular”; this man was poling a boatful of Malays up the Tanum river (Wells 1925). It was unusual for this man to have been working in this manner since Wells notes that the forest people were very shy and usually hid from outsiders<sup>5</sup>. They managed to carry out trade with Malays without having face-to-face contact by using the “silent trade”. This involved traders traveling to the edge of the forest and leaving out goods such as salt and finding that the next morning the bags of salt would be replaced by forest produce such as gutta-percha, rattan and dammar (Wells 1925).<sup>6</sup> The Malays would even use a similar method to hire the people to cut wood for Wells to use for his survey camps. Wells did not manage to interact with these people directly and referred to them in a typical colonial manner, as “aboriginal jungle dwarfs” and “the lowest form of human being in the world”. The photograph of a family that Wells included as the frontispiece of his 1925 book was a candid photograph that he took from behind a hiding place, without the subjects’ consent.

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the people of the Tanum valley continued to elude ethnographers. The Czech-Austrian priest Paul Joachim Schebesta (1929) noted that there was a group of around 400 people living on the Kelantan-Pahang border, and he referred to this group as the “Menri”. The British anthropologist I. H. N. Evans (1937) suggested that this reference was to “the wild people of the Tanom”. Another British anthropologist, Rodney Needham (1976) also found that it was a “convincing inference” to consider Schebesta’s “Menri” as referring to the people of the Tanum.

Evans carried out a search for the people of the Tanum but was unable to locate them. Like Wells, Evans found the people of the Tanum to be “unapproachable”. Evans (1937) does, however, provide an account of these people by British planter and conservationist, Theodore R. Hubback. Hubback lived near Kuala Lipis, opposite the confluence of the Tanum river (Figure 2) and seems to have had some interaction with the local people. Evans (1937) notes Hubback’s account as follows:

Their shelters, built on the ground, are often placed in a circle. No ornaments were seen on the women. Though they use blowpipes, these are obtained from Sakai groups. The bow is not found among them. They plant nothing, existing largely on tubers. They catch fish in primitive fashion, but do not appear to make traps for ground game. They climb trees and gather the unripe fruit and also rob any hornbills’ nests that they can find with young in them.”

<sup>5</sup> The context of this encounter suggests that the boatman may have been a slave. A history of slave raiding probably contributed to the timidity of the people.

<sup>6</sup> Rambo (1979) reviews opinions on the Semang “silent barter” with Malays.

Mr. Hubback added that the people wander right over from the Tembeling river, Trengganu and Kelantan and did not stop very long anywhere. He thought that they were “the most primitive and animal-like humans in Malaya”.

In 1952, the government carried out a census and recorded 559 people of “Negrito” ethnicity from the district of Lipis (Williams-Hunt 1952). This district includes several localities in and neighboring the Tanum valley. The map accompanying the census report (Williams-Hunt 1952) uses the term “Mendraq” (pronounced *mənra*<sup>?</sup>, *mənraa*<sup>?</sup>) to refer to the group living at the Kelantan-Pahang border. This group were also referred to as “Mendriq”, with *Menri*<sup>?</sup> being the Temiar version of the Northern Aslian word *Mənra*<sup>?</sup> – the two versions possibly having been exchanged (G. Benjamin pers. comm., 8 June 2019).

**Table 2:** Past estimates of the number of speakers of the Mintil language

Pop.	Date	Notes	Source
400	1920s	Menri of Pahang-Kelantan border	Schebesta (1929)
[559]	1950s	all “Negritos” of Lipis district	Williams-Hunt (1952)
40	1960s	“Mintil” of Chegar Perah	Benjamin (1976)
175	1995	3 “Batek Tanum” villages	‘government’ (Lye 2004) <sup>1</sup>
180	2005	“Mintil”, “Lye Tuck-Po”	Eberhard <i>et al.</i> (2019)
[700]	n/a	all Batek	Bradley (2010)
[1160]	2008	all Batek	Benjamin (2012)
60	2013	1 “Batek Tanum” village (Becah Kelubi)	Tacey (2016)
[1255]	2015	all Batek	Kruspe (2015)

<sup>1</sup> She notes that she had some reason to think this number an underestimation.

In the late 1960s, the British anthropologist Geoffrey Benjamin (1976) met patients from the Tanum who were at the Gombak Orang Asli hospital, just north of Kuala Lumpur. He collected a 142-item word list from one of these patients, a Bərahim son of Tale<sup>?</sup>. Upon analyzing this list, Benjamin found that the language was distinct from “Mendriq” (the language recorded from the mid-reaches of the Kelantan river around Kuala Krai and Bertam) (Endicott 1974, Benjamin 1976, Benjamin 2012).

Based on Benjamin’s findings, French linguist, Gérard Diffloth, (1975) refers to the language of the Tanum valley as ‘Mintil’, which Benjamin (1976) says is a term that was “in accordance with Negrito usage”. Lye (1997, 2004, 2013) notes that the people of the Tanum “fully reject” the name ‘Mintil’. Benjamin (2012) agrees that the language “should perhaps more neutrally be called ‘Batek Tanum’ or ‘Tanim’”. British anthropologist, Ivan Tacey, (pers. comm., 2017) suggests that “Mintil” is a derogatory term that the people of the Tanum use to refer to other groups of Semang in neighbouring valleys, while these groups, in turn, use the same term to refer to the people of the Tanum. G. Benjamin was told that the word was simply a first-person pronoun (G. Benjamin pers. comm., 8 June 2019).<sup>7</sup>

Citing his field notes on “Negritos of Kelantan” from 1970, Benjamin (1976) estimates that Mintil speakers probably numbered no more than forty persons, ranging along the Sungai Tanum and coming out of the forest occasionally at the Cegar Perah railway halt and having “no contacts with other Orang Asli groups, and only minimal contacts with Administration”. At that time, Mintil speakers were known of, but feared, by the Orang Asli of Kelantan (G. Benjamin pers. comm., 8 June 2019). On the other hand, Needham (1976), without reference to Benjamin, speculates that the people of the Tembeling (the ‘Batek’) actually depended on their trade contacts with the people of the Tanum for cutting tools that the latter had obtained from the Malays. Needham (1976) specifically mentions, “Negritos in the area of the upper Kechau were in contact with a Malay village named as Dada Kering, where they bartered products for tools and cultivated foodstuffs”. However, he noted that neither group had been reported on in the ethnographic literature.

In the early 1990s, Malaysian anthropologist, Lye Tuck-Po (1997), did extensive fieldwork with the Batek of the Tembeling. Benjamin (1976) refers to this group as ‘Bateg Deq [Dèq]’.<sup>8</sup> Lye (1997, 2001, 2004, 2013) notes that the people of the Tanum continue to speak a distinct language and thus should be

<sup>7</sup> Intriguingly, *amintil* is the first-person plural exclusive nominative pronoun (‘we’) in the Austronesian Aulua language of Vanuatu, with its short form being *mintil* (Ray 1926); cf. Malay *kami* 1PL.EXCL.

<sup>8</sup> The -g here being a mistakenly reported Temiar pronunciation (G. Benjamin pers. comm., 8 June 2019)

distinguished from the other groups of Batek. Lye (2001) also notes that an old folk Malay name for the people was *Batek belukar* ‘Batek of the secondary forest’ (van der Schot 1986). Lye (2004) describes these people as a “small hunting-gathering society, now semi-sedentary, that traditionally recognized the Tanum River in Pahang as their place of origin, although they have been reported to travel as far as Lebir in Kelantan”. She states that they now live mainly in three small villages where they have been settled by the government. Lye (2004) suggests that, while they formerly roamed over a large area, the people of Tanum are now “enclaved by Malays on one side (especially in the Tanum River valley from which they take their name) and the Batek [Deq] on the other (along the Kechau river) and therefore no longer have the land they need to maintain a fully mobile way of life.” Lye (2013) notes that some of her Batek [Deq] respondents said that it was the Tanum people who introduced them to the Kechau River valley.

Tacey (Tacey & Riboli 2014, Tacey 2016; I. Tacey pers. comm., 2017) notes several traumatic events in the history of the people of the Tanum. He suggests that they only began to self-identify as ‘Batek’ following the massacres of two Orang Asli communities by Malay settlers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – “prior to this they called themselves Orang Maia (Maia People)”. Following the guidelines provided by Benjamin (1985), this ethnonym would be spelled “Mayah”. Tacey (2016) notes that the Mayah villages were presently “between Kuala Lipis and Gua Musang”, and adds that, while the villages were designated and built by the government, the residents hold no documented title to their land. Some groups of Mayah had also occupied camps north of the Tanum valley, in Kelantan where they had contact with Hakka Chinese villagers of Kampung Pulai on the Sungai Galas (Tacey 2016). However, in 1975, some of the Chinese villagers were suspected of being involved in the Communist insurgency and government military forces attacked the region (Sharom 2001). Mortars landed on a Mayah village, causing them to flee to Pahang (Tacey 2016).

At present, there is some intermarriage with other Orang Asli groups, particularly those groups immediately bordering the Mayah’s territories. These groups include the Batek to the east and to the south, the Semai to the west, the Temiar to the northwest, and the Mendriq to the north. For the purpose of census and general administration, the government classifies the Mayah as “Batek”<sup>9</sup> and does not recognize them as a distinct ethnolinguistic group (Benjamin 2012). The national language, Bahasa Malaysia (a standard form of Malay) is dominant and is the only language taught in the government schools in the Tanum valley (attendance is compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 12).

### 3.2 Geographic distribution of Mintil speakers

There have been several maps showing the distribution of Mintil speakers, both together with other groups and specifically. Evans (1937) provides a map of the distribution of the people of the Peninsula which includes the label “MENRI” at the headwaters of the Tanum valley along the Kelantan-Pahang border. The first map to explicitly position the distribution of Mintil speakers is provided by Diffloth (1975) which places “Mintil” immediately to the west of “Batek”. This is followed by the map in Benjamin (1976), which depicts Mintil as an isolated language, with its territory portrayed as being completely surrounded by blank space. Benjamin’s (1983) detailed map of the distribution of the languages of the Peninsula shows ‘Mintil’ as occupying an area covering the mid- to upper-reaches of the Sungai Tanum. The map displays an overlay of Malay speakers to the south from the Pahang River and recent expansion from the north across the border with Kelantan.

A widely cited sketch map from Benjamin (1985a) includes the region of the Tanum valley under the ‘Mendriq’ of Kelantan. Map 2 from Lye (2004) takes this sketch map as a base and adds the label ‘Batek Tanum’ over the Tanum region.

The map in *Ethnologue*, “Language Map of Malaysia – Peninsular” (Eberhard et al. 2019) labels the Tanum Valley as ‘Mintil’, generally following the boundaries of Benjamin (1983) without the details of dialect boundaries and overlaps. This map also makes the following changes: it extends the lands of the ‘Jah Hut’ to include the Batek Nong territory; it includes the summit of Gunung Tahan as being within the ‘Batek’ territory; and it extends the ‘Batek’ area to cover the south-east of the Tanum valley.

I present my field observations on the geographic distribution of Mintil in section 4.2 and discuss the extent to which these observations agree with the earlier maps in section 5.2.

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<sup>9</sup> “Bateq” is an alternative spelling that is in use, with <q> being used for the velar stop because a final <k> denotes a glottal stop in the Malay spelling rules.

### 3.3 Linguistic affiliation of Mintil

Little is known about the linguistic status of Mintil apart from Benjamin's (1976) Gombak Hospital 146-item word list<sup>10</sup> and an unpublished word list that Lye collected from Kampung Sungai Garam in 1999. While Mintil has high cognacy rates in common with Mendriq (60%), Batek Deq (58%) and Batek Nong (58%), it is distinct enough for Benjamin (1976) to classify it separately. Four Mintil words on his list, *kəʃus* 'scratch', *tuwəjɪn* 'short', *ləmac* 'squeeze', and *seiʔ* 'wind', have forms that do not have cognates among the forms that are recorded for that meaning among the sixteen other Aslian languages in his study.

Benjamin's (1976) list also suggests that the Mintil lexicon is uniquely positioned in that it shares words with languages beyond its immediate borders – words not recorded for its neighbors. These words include cognates with Batek Nong<sup>11</sup>, Mah Meri, Jahai, and Semaq Beri which are more than 70-km outside the Tanum valley and with which Mintil has no documented history of contact. For example, Mintil shares *cəwəh* 'full' and *sɔc* 'bathe' only with Batek Nong. Among the list of words for the sixteen languages given, there are two unique cognate pairs between Mintil and Mah Meri: *mzt həʔ* 'here' & *mhe hɔʔ*; and *mzt həʔ* 'this' & *mhe nahɔʔ*. Unique cognate pair are also suggested for Mintil *paŋ* 'thou' & Jahai *pay*; and for Mintil *yeʔ* '3PL.INC' & Semaq Beri *yεh*.

Several recent studies have revised the Northern Aslian language varieties. Mintil was not included in the more recent analysis of the DOBES project *Tongues of the Semang* (Dunn et al. 2011). Kruspe et al. (2015) consider Mintil ("Batek Tanum") to be a dialect of Batek, along with Batek Deq, Batek Teq, and Batek Nong. Batek is one of eight Northern Aslian ethnolinguistic groups that are said to form a north-south continuum along the Peninsula: Maniq (including Maniq, Kensiw, Kentaq, Tea-de, and Jahai), Menraq-Batek (including Jahai, Menriq, and Batek), and Cheq Wong (Dunn et al. 2011: 307, Kruspe et al. 2015, Benjamin 2016). To supplement this classification, Yager & Burenhult (2017) note that the variety of Northern Aslian spoken in Sungai Rual, Kelantan, known as "Jedek" was more distinct than previously assumed and thus warranted classification as an additional independent variety in the Menraq-Batek group.

However, in addition to its vocabulary, Mintil also has distinctive morphological features. For example, Benjamin (2012) notes that the major syllables of Mintil frequently consist of diphthongal and even triphthongal nuclei – a feature that is not found in any other Aslian language. Examples of these nuclei are found in the words *kəlkəʔ* 'claw' and *kəui* 'head'. Another extended nucleus is in the word *ləyɔʊs* 'straight' which comes from Malay *lurus* – an example of the 16% of the samples that Benjamin (1976) finds to be borrowed from Malay, notably lower than the 21% Malay loan rate in Batek Deq.

Lye (2013) notes that Mintil's distinctive pronunciation and intonation features makes it sound like an "entirely different language" from Batek. Examples of this distinctive pronunciation include the following Mintil words which, based on Benjamin (1976), find unique cognates in Batek Deq: *mzt bateik* 'person' & *btq batek*; and *mzt bəut* 'hold' & *btq bət*. Mintil's diphthongal nuclei are also illustrated by comparison with the following words which appear to be unique cognates in Menriq: *mzt teul* 'mountain' & *mnq tol*; *mzt keun* 'swell' & *mnq kən*. Mintil pronunciation also stands out from the other Northern Aslian varieties in the example of the word for 'road': *mzt hay* (cf. *btq jhi*, *mnq har*).

### 3.4 Language use and intergenerational transmission

Lye (2013) notes that the Mayah, whom she refers to as "Batek Tanum", continue to use their natal languages and transmit it to their children. Lye (2013: 430) adds that the Mayah "seem to have a strong sense of identity, as do the Batek [Deq], and consider themselves to be distinct [from the Batek Deq]".

Lye (2013: 432), examining "accent" rather than word choice, provides an account of how Mayah-Batek intermarriages have resulted in bilingual children who end up speaking either Mintil or Batek Deq depending on their life circumstances. She adds that language may form a barrier to mixing between the Mayah and the Batek Deq, with the latter mocking the distinctive accent of the former, to the extent that she knows of only two or three Mayah who have moved freely with the Batek Deq.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin (1976).

<sup>11</sup> A disjunctive link with the more southerly Batek Nong is also noted for Jedek (Yager and Burenhult 2017).

## 4 Survey

### 4.1 Ethnolinguistic identity

My respondents referred to themselves as *Bateik* ‘in-group people’, *Bateik Təm Tanim* ‘people of the Tanum river’, and *Bateik Mayah* [ba'teik may'äh]. They rejected the name ‘Mintil’, stating that this word referred to a “Kampung Mintil”, which was in some unknown location in Kelantan. For the remainder of this paper, I shall refer to the people as ‘Mayah’, but, for consistency with existing studies, and to avoid confusion, I shall continue to refer to their language as ‘Mintil’.

### 4.2 Geographic distribution

The Mayah claim that their ancestors arose from the earth in the Tanum valley in the vicinity of Təm Pagai.<sup>12</sup> From here, they claim that they used to roam “as far as Kuala Lumpur”. The older folk used to regularly set up camps across the border of the Tembeling and Kechau valleys in the east. Somewhat more fixed boundaries are represented by the Jelai/Pahang River in the south (occupied by Malay communities) and the ridge along the top of the Semai-occupied Serau valley in the west (Figure 2).

Using the village estimates by JAKOA (2012) and my own observations in 2019, I estimate the total population of Mintil speakers to be in excess of 400 individuals (Table 3). I found that the three main Mayah villages are all in the district of Lipis, Pahang (Figure 2). In addition to these villages, the Mayah have several satellite campsites to which villagers occasionally retreat. These are referred to as *hayā*<sup>?</sup>, which is the same word used for a hut, a lean-to or any temporary shelter. One of these satellite campsites, at Təm Kəl̥kəə<sup>?</sup> (a tributary of Sungai Yu, i.e. Təm Diw), was established in 2016 and had about eight *hayā*<sup>?</sup> and four families (about 20 people) living there when I visited in April 2019.

*Table 3: Population and location of Mayah villages*

Kampung name	Population	Coordinates	Nearest Malay village
Kg. Sg. Garam (Təm Mayem)	179	4° 27' 12" N, 102° 3' 20" E.	Kg. Dada Kering (~2.5 km South)
Kg. Bencah Kelubi (Batu <sup>?</sup> Jalaj)	180	4° 38' 23" N, 101° 58' 45" E.	Kg. Telok Gunong (~4 km East)
Kg. Paya Keladi (Təm Hiyan)	61	4° 24' 18" N, 101° 55' 27" E.	Kg. Chegar Perah (~10 km North)
Kg. Təm Kəl̥kəə <sup>?</sup>	20	4° 34' 39" N, 101° 59' 43" E.	Kg. Kubang Rusa (~2 km North)
Total	420		

*Source:* Population data for first three villages from JAKOA (2012), data for the fourth from my 2019 visit.

#### *Kampung Sungai Garam*

This joint Mayah-Batek village is several kilometers east of the Tanum valley, next to a stream on the upper reaches of the Sungai Tekai, a tributary of the Sungai Kechau. This stream is referred to as Təm Mayem in Mintil, Təm Marem in Batek Deq (Lye 2004), and, via analogical reformation, Sungai Garam ‘salt river’ in Malay. Mintil was the main language of the village although, as Lye (1997, 2004, 2013) notes, there is some intermarriage between the people of this village and the Batek Deq.

<sup>12</sup> This river is shown on the topographic map (Sheet 77, DNMM 5101 Series, Department of Survey and Mapping Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur) as ‘S. Jengkas’, a tributary of ‘S. Kepung’, a tributary of the Sungai Tanum. As reported by Seow (2014), this area is presently inside the boundaries of the Taman Negara National Park. The discrepancy between the names could be due to a mapping error or to the fact that Malay onymic conventions differ from those of the Orang Asli.

### *Kampung Bencah Kelubi*

This Mayah village is next to a swamp at the foot of a large limestone outcrop (Batu<sup>?</sup> Jalaŋ<sup>13</sup>, labelled as ‘Gua Jibuk’ on the topographic map). It is not far from the Telok Gunong railway halt in the Mukim (sub-district) of Batu Yon. The village is on the Relau River, near Merapoh Town. The village takes its official Malay name<sup>14</sup> from *bencah* ‘bog’, and *kelubi* ‘swamp palm’ (*Eleiodoxa conferta*), a plant which is known for its very sour edible fruit.<sup>15</sup> The Mintil name for this village, *jalaŋ*, refers to the football-fruit tree, *Pangium edule*. The village is next to the river Təm Jalaŋ which flows through the limestone outcrop. Alternate names for the village include Biak, after the swamp, and Ki Ying (I. Tacey pers. comm. 2014), which is the name of a small tributary that joins the main river just north of the village. All the children spoke Mintil as their main language, although there is some intermarriage with the other non-Mayah including a Semai woman, a Jah Hut woman, a Semaq Beri woman, and an Indonesian man.

### *Kampung Paya Keladi*

This Mayah village takes its name from a riparian swamp (Malay *paya*) full of taro plants (*Colocasia esculenta*) (Malay *keladi*). The village is situated some three-kilometers south and on the opposite bank of the Sungai Tanum from a Malay village at the Chegar Perah railway halt. It is near the railway bridge over the river shown on topographic maps as ‘S. Kemejit’ and bears the Mintil name of the nearby river, Təm Hiyəŋ. All of the villagers spoke Mintil although, unlike the other villages, the majority of the children of this village attend a government school.

### **4.3 Language use and intergenerational transmission**

All of my respondents stated that “Bahasa Batek” (i.e. Mintil) was the main language spoken and it continued to be transmitted to children. The language was being used at home, amongst fellow villagers, when speaking with people from other Mayah villages, and, to a limited extent, to outsiders – particularly when referring to the names of certain places, plants and animals.

All children in all three villages and in the satellite camps spoke Mintil as their main language when interacting with their parents and with one-another while in the village. The children were not being taught Mintil in school. The children of Kampung Bencah Kelubi reported bullying and discrimination at the government school, which led to them presently being educated at home and under a village-based program run by a travel-volunteer company. The situation in Kampung Paya Keladi is quite different, with most of the children attending school regularly.

In addition to communication with fellow villagers, respondents also reported using Mintil to communicate with members of other Mayah villages. The residents of Kampung Paya Keladi noted with amusement their perception that the people of Kampung Bencah Kelubi spoke Mintil with a peculiar accent. The interaction between each of the Mayah villages was facilitated by increased ownership of motorcycles, and the completion of the southern stretch of the Central Spine Expressway.

The expansion of cellular telephone networks has meant that, in addition to face-to-face communication, most young men use smartphones and have accounts with social media applications such as Facebook and Whatsapp. One respondent had created a Whatsapp group named “GRUP BASO BATE” (lit. Batek language group), which had twelve members (all young men). This group mostly used recorded voice-messages but did include some attempts at transcribing Mintil using an orthography based on Bahasa Malaysia (despite the limitations of such an approach).

In addition to in-group communication, the Mayah do use some Mintil words in their interactions with other ethnolinguistic groups. Most Mayah men, and some women, can speak Malay. Some have learnt a little English and one respondent had created a list of sixty Mintil words with English and Malay translations. Many of the local Malay toponyms are based on Mintil names, such as the rivers Sungai Yu and Sungai

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<sup>13</sup> Limestone hills and caves are important sacred sites for the Mayah (Tacey & Overley 2014).

<sup>14</sup> This name was used in the following report by an environmental organization that regularly hires villagers as forest guides (Wong & Shepherd 2010). This name was also on the village’s official letterhead dated 10 May 2015. An older variation in the spelling of this name that is still in use is “Benchah Kelubi”.

<sup>15</sup> Alternate spellings of this name (possibly due to mishearings of an unfamiliar dialect) include Berchah Kelubi and Bercah Pelubi. Additional variants include Becah ‘muddy’ Kelubi (Tacey 2016), Cecah ‘dip’ Kelubi, Cichah Kelubi, Pecah ‘split’ Kelubi, Caruk ‘creek’ Kelubi and Paya ‘swamp’ Kelubi.

Garam are analogical reformations of the Mintil words *ɲiw* and *maʔem*. One Mintil word that has been adopted by outsiders visiting Kampung Bencah Kelubi is *bidan* (cf. Mal. ‘midwife’), a term used to refer to the older women of the village.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Demographics

The results of my survey suggest that earlier studies underestimated the population of Mintil speakers by underestimating both the number of settlements where the language was spoken and the population of Mintil speakers in each settlement. For example, Tacey (2016) notes that Kampung Bencah Kelubi consisted of “twenty rundown government-built houses and a few traditional lean-tos”, estimating the population as sixty.<sup>16</sup> The number of cement houses is correct, but the official database gives the population of the village in 2012 as 179 (Table 3). My respondents estimate the population in 2016 as around 200, which agrees with my own estimate. In 2017, about twenty people left this village and moved to satellite camps in the forest, so the 2012 estimate for the village is probably still quite accurate. This figure would also be consistent with the overall population of Mintil speakers being in excess of 400 individuals (Table 3).

### 5.2 Geographic distribution

My findings also clarify some misunderstandings regarding the location of the Mayah settlements. The location description given by Lye (2004) muddled Cegar Perah with the Batek Nong village of Cheka (Figure 2), on the Temetong River, in the Tembeling valley, some 70-km to the south-east.

My findings do not support the depiction of the map in Benjamin (1976) that the Mintil language is geographically isolated from other groups. The suggestion that the Mayah are isolated is reflected by the characterization by Lye (2004) that their territory has been “enclaved”. While it is true that the Mayah villages are somewhat separated from one-another by intervening development by outsiders, members of all three villages still visit, communicate and inter-marry. Historically, there is no direct evidence of Aslian being spoken in the areas which Benjamin (1976, 1983) portrayed as gaps in the distribution maps. In 1899, Skeat & Laidlaw (1953) mention meeting a “negrito” person from Sungai Galas, Kelantan, who was “quite half-wild” (this person could have been Mayah or Mendriq). Benjamin (1966) worked in the vicinity and found “that river is now apparently empty of Aboriginal inhabitants”. However, this lack of evidence was probably due to the Mayah being exceptionally shy people who were constantly on the move and lived at very low densities.

My mapping work suggests that the map in Benjamin (1983) is more accurate than any other map with respect to the distribution of Mintil speakers. However, Mintil is spoken further to the south of the boundary given by this map, with the village, Kampung Paya Keladi, being situated within an area indicated as being occupied by the Semai group that are actually found somewhat further west.

### 5.3 Linguistic affiliation

My analysis supports the assertion by Benjamin (1976) and Lye (2013) that Mintil should be considered as a distinct language variety in the Menraq-Batek group. In addition, the unique cognate pairs between Mintil and geographically distant languages such as Mah Meri and Jahai seem to suggest that Mintil may be similar to Jedek insofar as it has an intermediate status within Menraq-Batek. It is, however, necessary to treat these conclusions with some caution due to a degree of ambiguity in the terms used in the Swadesh list.

The ambiguity of the Swadesh terms is illustrated by the keyword ‘blood’. This word is one of the lexemes used by Yager & Burenhult (2017) to justify Jedek’s status as an independent member of the Menraq-Batek group. The fact that Jedek has retained the reflex of the proto-Aslian term for blood, rendered as *\*mahaam* (Phillips 2012), is suggested as indicative of the conservative nature of the language, relative to other members of the group. This is contrasted with the use of this word by other members of the Menraq-Batek where the reflex is said to be limited to “certain registers (e.g. myths) or has a restricted meaning, such as *bhīm* ‘menstrual discharge’” (Yager & Burenhult 2017: 539). Notably, in the case of Batek Deq, the

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<sup>16</sup> The published number was a mistake, and his actual estimate for this village was 124 people (I. Tacey pers. comm. 2017).

common word for ‘blood’ is *yāp* (Benjamin 1976: 103)<sup>17</sup>. In Mintil, the word for ‘blood’ is *məhim*. This fact might be used to suggest that the language shares some of the conservative characteristics of the Jedek lexicon, compared with Batek Deq. However, these conclusions may be due to a lack of precision in the data collection – my respondents distinguished *məhim* ‘human blood’ from *yāp* ‘animal blood’ (cf. kns, knq, btq (Batek Nong), cwg: *məhəm*; mnq *bəhəm*; sea: *bəhiip*; jah *nəhim*; mhe, szc, sza, tmo: *maham* (all from Benjamin 1976)). It may thus be necessary to examine whether other Aslian languages maintain such a distinction.<sup>18</sup>

Further support for Mintil’s status as a distinctive language variety within the Batek-Menraq group comes from two words which appear to have a non-Malay Austronesian root. Benjamin (1976) recorded no cognates among Aslian languages for Mintil *saʔ* ‘one’ (< Proto-Austronesian \**sa* (Blust & Trussel 2010), cf. Malay *satu*). Similarly, Mintil and Menriq are the only Aslian languages Benjamin (1976) recorded to use the Austronesian word *ʔasuʔ* for ‘dog’ (< Proto Western Malayo-Polynesian \**asu* (Blust & Trussel 2010), cf. Malay *anjing*, Proto Aslian \**cuəʔ* (Philips 2012)). These loanwords provide evidence of significant early contact between pre-Malay Austronesian groups and the ancestors of the Mayah.

## 6. Conclusion: Revised Mintil language endangerment status

The Mayah consider themselves to be a distinct ethnic group, with a fairly defined territory, and a unique language. The data on language use and intergenerational transmission suggests that the language endangerment status of Mintil is not actually “moribund”. Mintil meets the criteria that it is (i) “used for face-to-face communication by all generations” and, (ii) “the situation is sustainable”. Based on these criteria, Mintil would meet the EGIDS criterion for “vigorous” (6a). This revised evaluation, together with the population estimate, is presented in the context of other Aslian languages in Figure 1.

In addition to the EGIDS standard, the language use data suggests that Mintil meets the criterion of Krauss (2007) for defining a language as “stable” (i.e., that “all speak, children & up”). Indeed, if the *status quo* situation in the villages is maintained, the languages will meet his further criterion of “not only being learned as mother-tongue by children as the norm, but which we predict will still be being so learned for the foreseeable future”.

There is a danger that these conclusions understate the risks to the survival of the language. As noted by Krauss (2007), it is probably not right to classify any language with fewer than 10,000 speakers as ‘safe’. Such languages are vulnerable to many threats, including demographic intrusion, urbanization, and mass media exclusively in the dominant language. Indeed, my initial observations of Mintil key words suggest that there is linguistic pressure on Mintil from contact with Malay; however, further research (focused particularly on grammatical words) would be need to confirm this observation.

Despite these threats, there have recently been several developments that may support the conservation of the Mintil language. In particular, the government has begun to support the teaching of Aslian languages, producing a Semai dictionary and teaching a mother-tongue class (of Semai and Temiar) in schools where the majority of pupils have such a mother-tongue (Ghani 2015, Vengadesan 2019). While Semai and Temiar have far more speakers than Mintil, these initiatives mark a change in mindset by the government. Furthermore, the empowerment provided by information technology and social media means that the Mayah now have increased opportunities to document and apply their own language by themselves.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin (2014) notes that this is probably cognate with Temiar *nebɲaab* and Semai *nyaam*, with the latter being associated with the red of certain sunsets (Dentan 2008), perhaps a sign of the blood offered in the *somuk* (blood-letting) ritual that Karey (the Senoi sky god) has rubbed onto his chest.

<sup>18</sup> There are further ambiguous terms from the Swadesh list for which my respondents provided clarifications. These included ‘slice’: *gəwt* ‘slice lengthwise’ & *ket* ‘slice across’; ‘fat (grease)’: *tɔuc* ‘body fat’ & *halɛg* ‘grease’; ‘flow’: *ʔeyowɲ* ‘drift’ & *təloh* ‘flow’; ‘hold’: *pəgɛɲ* ‘hold’ & *bɔut* ‘take’; ‘knife’: *pisau* ‘knife’ & *wɛɲ* ‘machete’; ‘mouth’: *tənət* ‘lips’, *kənəd* ‘mouth’ & *həɲ* ‘teeth’; ‘name’: *namaʔ* ‘name’ & *kənmoh* ‘to name’; ‘red’: *meyah* ‘red (paint)’ & *bərkeɲ* ‘red (natural color)’; ‘road’: *hay* ‘footprint’ & *cəneɔɲ* ‘path’; ‘suck’: *jaut* ‘suck in’ & *səksəp* ‘suck something out’; ‘thin’: *hetel* ‘narrow’ & *dəgɛɲ* ‘thin’; ‘wash (bathe)’: *sɔuc* ‘to get wet’ & *ənləy* ‘bathe’; ‘wipe’: *ɲgəsöt* ‘rub off’ & *həmpɪy* ‘wipe off’.

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