



(From left) Javanese-language representative Haider Sahle, Kristang representative Bernard Mesenas and event organiser Kevin Martens Wong hope to get participants interested in Singapore's linguistic diversity through activities such as language puzzles at the upcoming Languages of Singapore Trail event at the Asian Civilisations Museum. ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

# Languages speak of S'pore's rich and diverse roots

## Language Trail event aims to spark interest in preserving 'minority' and heritage tongues

**Melody Zaccheus**

Linguaza, jyujuin and basa. This is

how you say "language" in Kristang, Cantonese and Javanese.

Speakers of these "minority" tongues and heritage languages will

gather with a common purpose on May 21 at the Asian Civilisations Museum to tell their stories at the Languages of Singapore Trail.

Possibly the first such gathering here, the event aims to spark interest in documenting and preserving Singapore's "beautiful linguistic diversity", said its organiser, National

University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Kevin Martens Wong.

Participants will learn about the languages from language representatives and native speakers, who will prepare activities such as language puzzles and other games.

The trail is part of the larger Kristang Language Festival taking place

on May 20 and 21.

Mr Wong, a 24-year-old linguistics major, has been championing the dying Portuguese-Eurasian language of Kristang since last year. He has developed a curriculum and runs classes for interested learners. Kristang is a language spoken fluently by fewer than 100 people in

Singapore today.

Mr Wong, who is Eurasian-Chinese, said: "The idea for this trail came from a feeling that Kristang is not alone as a minority language. Through the friends and collaborators my team and I have met, we got to learn about the many others that still exist in Singapore."

"Without exception, each of these languages has a remarkable story about the identities of its speakers, their history, and their place in the rich and multicultural setting of Singapore."

For Javanese-language representative Haider Sahle, 36, the gathering is a platform from which to explore the country's rich and diverse roots.

Mr Haider, who is vice-president of the Javanese Association of Singapore, said: "It is important to remember where our forefathers came from and to enrich our lives with this knowledge so that these cultures and languages will continue to live on in Singapore."

According to 1825 census reports, there were 38 Javanese living in Singapore. By 1891, the number had climbed to 8,541, with many living in Kampung Java. There are 89,000 ethnic Javanese in Singapore, according to 2010 census records, making them the largest Malay sub-group here. But few speak the language, and there may be many more Javanese Singaporeans who now identify themselves as Malay.

Mr Haider, whose father's family hails from central and eastern Java, said he will be sharing common phrases and common words, or everyday language, with participants.

Hainanese representative Wong Soon Fen, 54, a lecturer at NUS' College of Alice and Peter Tan and also the associate director of residential life there, will introduce basic Hainanese phrases and share interesting facts such as how the Hainanese people first settled in the Seah Street and Purvis Street area.

The Hainanese form the fifth-largest Chinese dialect group in Singapore, numbering more than 170,000 in the 2010 census.

The festival will also feature Baba Malay, Banjarese, Bengali, Boyanese, Bugis, Gujarati, Hakka, Maquista, Minangkabau, Malayalam, Punjabi and Singapore Sign Language.

Organisers said the programme is flexible and they are open to featuring other languages.

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