

Siraya: the revival of a dormant Formosan language

Alexander Adelaar
(National Museum of Ethnography, Osaka
Asia Institute, University of Melbourne)

Siraya is a Formosan language once spoken nearby Tainan City in southwestern Taiwan. It was the main language of communication of the Dutch, who colonised parts of Taiwan from 1624 to 1662, trying to Christianise the population and bringing about far-reaching structural change in their communities. After Dutch colonisation, Siraya gradually lost its importance and became extinct at the beginning of last century due to the influx of Chinese in Taiwan. However, the last twenty years have seen a renewed interest in the language: linguists (like myself) began to study it systematically, whereas the descendants of the erstwhile Siraya-speaking community started an energetic programme for its revival.

I would like to give a brief outline about the history of the Siraya people and demonstrate how their language is of great interest, not only for its unique linguistic features, but also for Austronesian prehistory. More importantly, perhaps, the language has also become a symbol of ethnic identity and self-respect for the Siraya community. Their endeavour to revive it is remarkable. Renewed interest in Siraya can also be seen in the light of the Taiwanese nationalist debate in general, in which, somewhat unexpectedly, Formosan identity has become an important factor.

Finally, I would like to discuss some of the difficulties and methodology (or absence of a clear methodology) involved in the reconstitution of a grammar and lexicon on the basis of old texts.