

Ghost languages: Language and Spiritualism in a Siraya Community of Taiwan



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台湾には多くの先住民族がいて、独自の言語をかりうじて伝えているが、言語学的な研究に比べて、それら言語で語られる伝承の研究はおろそかにされてきた。本稿では現代に生きるシャーマンの語りを音声と文字で忠実に採取した。

Abstract

The Sirayan community in Taiwan, like other Aboriginal communities, has been dispossessed of its language as a result of colonization by Fujianese-speaking Han Chinese, Japanese, and, since 1947, a Mandarin-speaking majority. Our previous work with Sirayan Aboriginal shamans uncovered fascinating folk-theories about the origins and authenticity of their heritage language based in long-held cultural practices and contemporary community politics. Linguists document endangered languages by bringing together linguistics, contemporary ethics respecting communities' participation, and digital technologies for recording and sharing. However, language documentation is typically narrowly focused on language systems – grammars and vocabularies – rather than the choices that speakers make, whether in the forms of their languages, where they choose to use them, what they choose to express, or their feelings and beliefs about their languages.

The case of Sirayan shamanism illustrates how various layers of this community's languages have become 'ghosts' – endangered and rarely documented. The shamans generally communicate and describe their practices using the Taiwanese language (Minnan/Hoklo), which, despite being spoken by millions of people, itself remains little documented, largely ignored in formal, administrative and academic life, undergoing significant change, with almost no literacy, and vulnerable to politicization of its use in media, education and public life. We present texts in Taiwanese as well as, for the first time, video and transcriptions of the shamans' god-channeling events where two shamans "speak in tongues" channeling their gods.

Our documentation of Sirayan shamans' vernacular accounts of their community's history and practices in Taiwanese enables this knowledge to reach a wider Taiwanese public in its own language, and signposts the Taiwanese language as part of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Asia.

Keywords

Siraya, Taiwan, shaman, spiritualism, language

Introduction

In previous research and cultural documentation with members of two local Sirayan Aboriginal communities in southwestern Taiwan, we started with the aim of offering whatever help we might be able to provide for existing activities in the revival of the Sirayan heritage language (Fang & Nathan 2013). What we found, however, was a complex interconnected set of local

social, political, and theological dynamics that would frame any conventional language work. We glimpsed and documented how views about language intertwined with that of religion and culture. Comparing and contrasting the links between language and culture in each community, we found a commonality in that each invoked sources of cultural authority for their stance on language authenticity. While one group has access to

historical colonial language resources but is thoroughly Christianised, the second group is desperately seeking language but retain their Indigenous spiritual traditions.

In more recent fieldwork, we conducted further consultation, a review of previous recordings, and interviews and documentation with the second group, the Hoan-á-chhân (潘仔田) Sirayan community in the Koaⁿ-tiân (宮田) area. This paper presents video and transcriptions of shamans' god-channelling events for the first time, where two shamans "speak in tongues", channelling their *Alizou* gods.¹ The shamans more generally communicate and describe their practices using the Taiwanese language (Minnan/Hoklo), which itself survives in the twilight of dominance by Mandarin Chinese.

As well as documenting aspects of shamanic practice, this paper (and the website that will accompany it) has two advocacy goals. First and foremost, we wish to respect the Hoan-á-chhân community's request to convey "their own story" to a wider public.

Secondly, we convey these community accounts of their history as direct transcriptions of the shamans' own words in spoken Taiwanese. These represent all-too-rare examples of written Taiwanese together with parallel-translations (in Mandarin and English). Through this, we also wish support the maintenance and valorisation of the Taiwanese language. Despite being spoken by millions of people, Taiwanese is undergoing significant change and remains under-documented, largely ignored in formal, administrative and academic life, with almost no literacy, and vulnerable to politicisation of its use in media, education and public life.

Sirayan origins

Like many peoples, the Sirayans take a keen interest in their origins. As we will see, this is also a matter that is of a wider, national political interest for Taiwan. Most of the conventional sources and literature about the history of the Sirayans concerns their language, their

interactions with the various waves of colonisers including the Han people from Fujian, Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese, and how their language and culture fared through those interactions. The deeper roots of the Sirayan people are most often discussed in terms of the history and genealogy of their language.

A foremost academic scholar of the Sirayan language, Alexander Adelaar, classifies Sirayan as a member of the 'Formosan' language family. While that family includes all the Indigenous languages of Taiwan, it is also one of the two major branches of the very widespread family of languages known as Austronesian. The Austronesian language family is one of the world's most widely distributed, and includes "native languages all over Southeast Asia and the Pacific" (Adelaar, nd; see Figure 1).

While divergence of languages, both geographically and over time through language change, can tell us much about population genealogies and movements, ultimately there is no fixed or necessary correlation between a group's language and its origins or deeper migration history. Additionally, in the discussions and beliefs of everyday life, language, origins and history can easily be intermingled or confused. This is especially the case for many Indigenous people where ancient written records may not exist, and it is highly amplified by the ravages of colonialism and the destruction it has brought to cultural continuity.

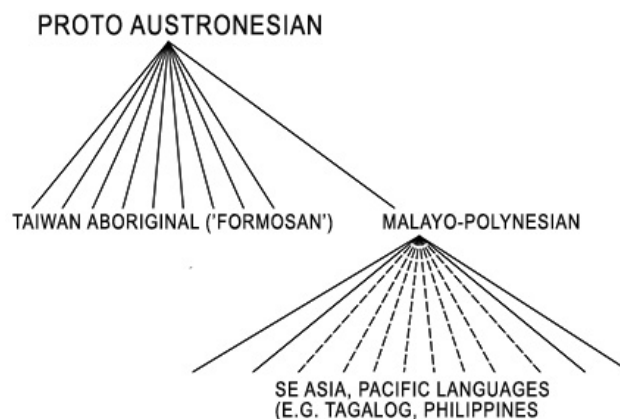


Figure 1. Language genealogy for the Austronesian languages (adapted from Adelaar, nd).

¹ Video will be made available through the website that we are creating in collaboration with the community; see further below for details (<http://www.speaktaiwanese.com/siraya/>).

Various sources of information and social factors do indeed seem to have contributed to a creative fusion of origin beliefs in the Sirayan communities we worked with. In the Hoan-á-chhân (潘仔田) Sirayan community in the Koaⁿ-tiân (官田) area (see Map 1) where we conducted fieldwork, a belief has grown that *another* nearby Sirayan group (Tainan Ping-pu Siraya Culture Association) believes that the Sirayan people originated in the Philippines.

As noted above, the linguistic and anthropological evidence is to the contrary – that is, the Austronesian languages and cultures originated in Taiwan and spread throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. However, several sources have fed into the Hoan-á-chhân community’s suspicion that others claim a Philippines origin, a claim that they wish to contest. It appears that, for the Hoan-á-chhân community, beliefs about their geographic origins have become significant markers of their identity.



Map. 1. Location of the Hoan-á-chhân (潘仔田) Sirayan community in the Koaⁿ-tiân (官田) area of south-western Taiwan (courtesy Google maps).

So what are the sources of this origin controversy? Firstly, there is a significant body of academic linguistic literature dealing with the Austronesian language family that, like Figure 1, show a relationship between Taiwanese languages and related or descendant languages; in many cases, Tagalog (the main Indigenous language of the Philippines) is noted as an exemplar. For example, Adelaar (nd.) states:

The basic outline Siraya grammar is not very different from that of other Formosan or “Philippine-type” languages.

Secondly, local communities have become polarised around the perception of Filipino origins as a result of the influence of particular community leaders and their religious and linguistic associations. The more widely known and influential Tainan Ping-pu Siraya Culture Association combines the authority of the main historical records of the Sirayan language – especially a 17th century translation of the Christian Gospel of St. Matthew into a Siraya dialect by Dutch missionaries (Adelaar 2011) – with political and academic recognition, and leadership by a senior female Sirayan woman and her Filipino husband. The latter emigrated to Taiwan from the Philippines and speaks publicly of his facility with revitalising the Sirayan language as being inspired and facilitated by his own Filipino group’s language Bisaya (see also the transcript of recording 201209-14. mp4 at 59:29 below). In a previous paper (Fang and Nathan 2013) we described in detail how that group drew its authority to represent the Sirayan language from its use of the colonial records, strengthened by their ongoing Christian identity, while the Hoan-á-chhân group has little confirmable pre-colonial Sirayan language yet retains significant continuity with its Aboriginal religious and ritual traditions.

A third factor might be the clouding of the actual origins of the Sirayan people. The Hoan-á-chhân group say that their origins are in China, which is consistent with academic accounts, yet this fact is rarely highlighted, possibly because Aboriginal arrivals in Taiwan go back some thousands of years, beyond recorded history, and further complicated by the national representation of Taiwan’s Indigenous people as evidence of Taiwan’s

independence from China (Adelaar 2014). The Hoan-á-chhân group holds firmly to the view that their ancestors emigrated from China to Taiwan about 800 years ago (see recording 201209-09.mp4 below).

Guided by information channelled through Sirayan shaman Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕 from their god Alizou 阿立祖, a group from the Hoan-á-chhân community travelled to China to try to identify their place of origin. They believe that they found the approximate area, in Henan Province (河南省), boosted by further evidence in the form of sharing their surname with common surnames used in that area. In turn, this new information has added to the mixed picture of Sirayan origins, because Hoan-á-chhân people now feel that others have mistakenly confused the home of the 17th century Dutch Christian translators, Holland – in Taiwanese Hô-lân – with Hô-lâm, the very similar-sounding Taiwanese name for Henan Province.

We worked with two Sirayan shamans. Our initial contact was made with male shaman Mr Huáng Róng-fēng 黃榮豐, a postman from village Pat-thâu-iûⁿ 北頭洋, who generously participated in many interviews and video documentation sessions of his shaman practices with us. Subsequently, we were introduced to female shaman Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕, a cattle farmer from the Hoan-á-chhân group at the nearby Koaⁿ-tiân village. Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕 is the most senior shaman of the Sirayan tribe. Female shamans in Taiwanese are called âng-î (in Chinese 尪姨); male shamans are called Hiàng-thâu (in Chinese 尪頭). Although the two shamans had never previously met, they very graciously agreed to meet and for their interactions to be video-documented (see below for excerpts and discussion).

In the following interview extract, Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕 explains her community's beliefs about these issues. Note that in what follows we refer to her as âng-î 尪姨 Chén when she is in shamanic trance.

[Recording 201209-14.mp4, recorded at Hoan-á-chhân (潘仔田) in 2012 with âng-î 尪姨 Chén; 我=Meili Fang (interviewer)]

59:00 我: I m̄-sī siók-î lín chit chōk ê。
她不是屬於你們這族的?

Doesn't she belong to this tribe?

59:03 尪姨: Kāng-khoán siók goán chit chōk ê, iá-m̄-kò sī pài bô kāng-khoán ê。

一樣是屬於這族的, 不過是拜不同的。

She does belong to our tribe, but prays to a different god.

59:06 我: Hòⁿ, pài bô kāng-khoán ê。

哦, 是拜不同的。

Oh, I see. She prays to a different god.

59:07 尪姨: Hèⁿ, i pài ki-tok kàu, ah goán pài kan-á giáh huiⁿ ê。

對, 她是拜基督教, 啊我們是拜祀瓶子 (祀壺), 拿香的。

Yes, she worships as a Christian and we pray using a bottle [= sacramental jar].

59:10 我: Goá chai, goá chai, tân-sī i pún-sin i chhut-seⁿ eng-kai mā-sī siók-î...

我知道, 但是她本身出生是應該不是屬於...

Ah I see, I see. But did she grow up in the Sirayan tradition?

59:17 尪姨: Pêⁿ-po-chōk ê,

平埔族的。

(as a Pingpu [plains people].)

59:18 我: Hèⁿ āh.

是啊。

Yes, I know.

59:19 尪姨: Iá in sī pài ki-tok kàu, ah goán pài kan-á án-ne.

而她們是拜基督教, 啊我們是拜瓶子的。

They are Christians but we are kan-á [bottle].

59:22 我: Ah i kóng ê, in lò k ōe í-keng long bô-kāng khi, goán-choán bô-kāng khi à?

而她說的, 錄的話都已經不同了, 完全不同了?

Are their language materials completely different?

59:29 尪姨: In kóng chit-soeh, iá goán kóng chit-soeh lá. In bô cheng-kù, goán mā bô cheng-kù là hōⁿ, ah i kóng-ê kóng hōⁿ, tō sī i tú-á-hó kè hit-ê Hui-lit-pin ê ang-sài nā hōⁿ, ah só-í kóng in iōng in ê Hui-lit-pin gi lái han ùi Pêⁿ-po-chōk lá。

她們說的是一種, 我們說的又是另一種。他們沒有證據, 雖然我們也沒有證據, 但是她是剛好嫁給那個菲律賓的丈夫, 所以說他們用的是菲律賓的語言來混為平埔族的。

They tell one story, we tell another story. They don't have evidence; we don't have evidence either. But

because she married a Filipino, they have mixed their Filipino language with our Pingpu (Siraya) language.

Iá-m̄-ko, í chiah ê Pêⁿ-po-chōk mā bô kah jīn-tōng là. Nā ū jīn-tōng ê òe tō sin-chhéng ē khí-lâi lá, hōⁿ, íá tō sī bô kah jīn-tōng là. Ah, Tâi-oân cheng-hú nā hōⁿ, I mā bô kah goán jīn-tōng goán Pêⁿ-po-chōk là. 不過，以我們這些平埔族的，我們也不認同他們。若我們有認同他們的話，就可能申請得過。然而臺灣政府也不認同我們平埔族的。

But we don't identify with (or accept) their language. If we had accepted their language, our Pingpu group might possibly be recognised (by the government). However the government doesn't recognise all the Pingpu groups.

Notice how the shaman contrasts religious traditions using an expression that in English is something like “worship via the bottle”. Observing the shrines and religious events clearly highlights the salience of the sacramental jars (see Figure 2) as well as both bottles of water and beer in Shamanic practice. But without this vernacular expression *kan-á* (祀壺) in mother-tongue Taiwanese, authenticity of descriptions of the religious practices would be lost.



Figure 2. Showing *kan-á* (centre), beer bottle and betel nut. All are found in Sirayan temples and are important for worship. Photographed by Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕.

Shamans as history tellers

In earlier research, we investigated the possibilities of shamans being able, through communication with their ancestor gods, to provide information about the Sirayan language (Fang & Nathan 2013). We found that although it was not feasible to elicit significant linguistic information in this way, it proved to be an interesting ethnographic study of how communities appeal to their religious and ceremonial traditions to provide authority for their community's understandings of their language and origins.



Figure 3. Conducting interviews and documentation at Hoan-á-chhân kong-kài 潘仔田公廨. Left: Meili Fang, centre âng-î 尪姨 Chén; right: Hiàng-thâu 向頭 Huáng.

The Hoan-á-chhân community highlights its origins in ancient China, an emphasis that may have been amplified by the recently implied origins in the Philippines. It is possible that now community members see their origin beliefs as distinguishing attributes of their identity. Several community members, including Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕 and her sister Chén Qiū-é 陳秋娥, encouraged us to disseminate information about their community and culture, including in Mandarin Chinese so that it could be made accessible to the wider Taiwanese community. Further below we discuss some of the issues of disseminating information in Chinese, the dominant language of media and wider communication, and Taiwanese, the vernacular, daily and personal language spoken in all the local communities across the Tainan area.

In the following interview segment, Meili asked âng-î 尪姨 Chén about how and why their religion came

to Taiwan:

[Recording 201209-09.mp4, recorded at Hoan-á-chhân kong-kài 潘仔田公廨 in 2012 with âng-î 尪姨 Chén]

12:39 我: Chhīⁿ-kóng chit-ê A-l...t-chó' ê sìn-ióng, lí kóng sī chêng lín sè-hàn ê-sī-chūn to tóa kan-á cháu.
比如,你說這個阿立祖信仰,從你們小的時候就開始抱著瓶子逃。

About this Alizou's religion, at the time you were a child you (plural) had already started to carry that bottle [bottle = sacramental jar: see below].

12:46 尪姨: M̄-sī goán sè-hàn, sī chiah-ê chōk-kūn, lāu-lâng beh chhut-cháu, teh chiàn-cheng beh cháu, in tō chah kan-á the cháu, m̄ sī goán sè-hàn, m̄ sī goán A-l...t-chó', goán sè-hàn. Goán s,, lāng kóng bō-tang thó-chiáh, goán it-tit tō it-tit lâi là, tō-kàu Tâi-ôan lâi-là. Ah tō-kàu Tâi-ôan tú-á hó gū-tiōh chiàn-cheng.

不是我們小的時候,而是我們族群的人,老人要逃跑,因戰爭要逃跑,他們就抱著瓶子的逃,不是我們小的時候,不是我們阿立祖在逃。我們是爲了度日糊口才逃跑到這裏(臺灣)來的,而跑到臺灣時卻剛好遇到戰爭。

Not when we were young. The old people of our group fled from war so they had to carry the bottles and escape. It wasn't Alizou running away.

We (our seven sisters) escaped to Taiwan to survive and when we arrived in Taiwan and unfortunately when we arrived in Taiwan we encountered war.

13:10 我: Sím-m...h chiàn-cheng lí kám chai?

什麼戰爭?

War, which war?

13:12 尪姨: Ná hit-chūn sī sím-m...h chiàn-cheng, sī tī Bêng-tiào ê-sī-chūn ah.

當時是處於明朝的時代。

That was during the Ming Dynasty era.

13:20 我: Bêng-tiào? Peh-pah kúi-tang chêng, kám kah Chu-hong-bó in ê chhau-ke biát-m̄ng ê sī-tāi kám-ū liân-káp?

明朝? 明朝的話800多年前,那麼跟朱洪武時的抄家滅門的時代有連接嗎?

Ming Dynasty? That was more than 800 years ago. Is there any connection with the time of first emperor Zhu Hongwu who killed a lot of families?

13:31 尪姨: Lóng ū liân-káp là, èng-kai sī Bêng-tiào ê sī-dāi goán kai-sí cháu ê là.

有連接,應該是明朝時是我們開始逃的。

Yes, there is a connection. It ought to have been the Ming Dynasty when we began to escape.

13:37 我: Ah h...t-chūn lín sī án-chóaⁿ tō lâi kàu...? hit-chūn ê chūn iā-bô foat-tát, lín sī án-chóaⁿ tō lâi kàu chiah ê?

當時你們是怎樣,當時船運並不發達,你們是怎麼的逃到這裏來的?

At that time, how could you come here ... when ships were not that developed?

13:43 尪姨: He tō khò tì-hūi àh là. khò tì-hūi àh là. Beh án-chóaⁿ tō lâi kàu Tâi-ôan-tó, tō khò chúi-éng àh là, iá-koh khò goán ê ka-lāi sîn nā hōⁿ, sng goán ka-lāi-sîn ê l...t-liōng àh là.

那就得靠智慧了。靠智慧了。當時要到這個臺灣島時,我們一是靠水流(的方向),和靠我們的家內神(祖神)的力量了。

It needed wisdom at that time, how we came to Taiwan Islands, firstly we used the currents in the sea, and secondly used the power/protection of the ancestors.

14:00 尪姨: Goán Pêⁿ-pō-goân-chù-bîn A-l...t- chó' nā-hōⁿ, ū goán ka-tī ê ka-lāi-sîn, iā tō sī khò goán ê ka-lāi-sîn nā-hōⁿ, iā tō khò I ê l...t-liōng, beh án-chóaⁿ kā goán chí-mōai lâi ín-khi-lâi lâi-kàu Tâi-ôan chiah là. Ah, beh án-chóaⁿ chhú-lí jip chit-ê Tâi-ôan-tó là, ah só-í goán pē-bú ē s...t-chong, ē bō-khì nā-hōⁿ, tō sī chit-ê goán-in nā hōⁿ.

我們平埔原住民阿立祖也就是我們的家內神,也就是靠我們的家內神的力量,讓它如何地將我們姐妹來引導到臺灣此地及如何地處理入此臺灣島,而我們的父母會失蹤的原因也因此而來的。

Our Pingpu Aboriginal people's Alizou also is our ancestor, so we also depended on their power to lead our sisters toward Taiwan, and to arrive on this island. And the reason our parents disappeared is because of this time when they escaped to Taiwan.

14:24 尪姨: Goán tong-chhe-sī, goán pē-bú, lóng kā goán kat ê, che-lâng kat ch...t-ê kho là, ah lóng pāk chò-hóe là, iā-m̄-kó goán pē-bú tō sī bō giau goán kat chòe-hóe là. Ah nā chò âng-î nā hōⁿ, it-tēng ài kat

ch...t-ê. Kho'là, chò âng-î là.

當初我們父母都在我們手上繫上一個紅圈且將我們都綁在一起，但我們父母並沒跟我們繫在一起。因此若要當尪姨（乩童）比得繫上這個紅圈。

At that time, our parents tied all our sisters together by the hands with red bands, but our parents didn't tie themselves together with us. So if you want to become a shaman you have to tie a red band around your hand.

Channelled language and glossolalia

During this fieldwork we were able to record some rare examples of “conversations between gods”. These conversations occurred between the two shamans, âng-î 尪姨 Chén and Huáng Róng-fēng 黃榮豐, from different local communities of the Tainan District of south-western Taiwan. In what follows we refer to Huáng Róng-fēng in shamanic trance as Hiàng-thâu 向頭 Huáng.

In trance, a Sirayan shaman “channels” or speaks as and for one of their seven gods Alizou.² While most of this channelled speech was expressed in Taiwanese – and never in Mandarin Chinese³ – there were special instances of speech in an “unknown language”. Video examples of these two shamans conversing in this



Figure 4. Shamans âng-î 尪姨 Chén and Hiàng-thâu 向頭 Huáng conversing through the words of their god Alizou.

2 Some believe that there are five Alizou sisters, but Alizou's message (via âng-î 尪姨 Chén) is that there are seven.

3 Although âng-î 尪姨 Chén said that if necessary, Alizou can convey her message in Chinese.

speech variety will be presented in the website (see below). While in English we might be tempted to refer to this as “speaking in tongues”, the latter generally refers to mystical speech inspired or directed by a group's god (typically Pentecostal or Charismatic Christian) that the speaker and their audience cannot actually understand. The linguistic term for this phenomenon is ‘glossolalia’. However, in contrast, the shamans take their inspired speech to be comprehensible and indeed form the vehicle for conversational exchange.

Following several of these exchanges between the shamans while in trance, Meili asked âng-î 尪姨 Chén “what did she say? / what are you [two] saying?” and âng-î 尪姨 Chén responded with an account of the exchange. Here is an excerpted example:

[Recording 201209-14.mp4, recorded at Hoan-á-chhân kong-kài 潘仔田公廨 in 2012 with âng-î 尪姨 Chén and Hiàng-thâu 向頭 Huáng]

07:26 我：Lín chím má kóng chiah ê oe mā mâ-hoan lí kah góa hoan chit-ê kám-hó?

你們呢現在說的這些話，也麻煩你翻譯一下好嗎？

What you [plural] just said, could you please translate it?

07:41 尪姨：Hó, I chím má sī the kóng in Pak-thâu-iâng là...

好。她現在是說有關於他們北頭洋...

OK, now she is talking about the situation of Bei Tou Yang [another Sirayan community].

A more detailed theological or ethnographic account of the gods and the people's relationship with them is beyond the scope of our research and this paper. However, it is interesting that for âng-î 尪姨 Chén, it is very clear which of the seven female gods (all sisters) is the agent of the channelled speech, as she describes in the following interview segment:

[Recording 201209-14.mp4, recorded at Hoan-á-chhân kong-kài 潘仔田公廨 in 2012 with âng-î 尪姨 Chén and Hiàng-thâu 向頭 Huáng]

27:17 我：Lín long-chóng sī kúi-ê chí-mōai á? Làk-ê ò?

Lín sèⁿ Phoanⁿ ê?

你們總共是幾個姐妹？六個？你們姓潘的。

- In total how many sisters do you [your “Pan” family] have??
- 27:18 尪姨: Chhit-ê.
七個。
Seven.
- 27:21 我: Chhit-ê.
七個。
Seven?
- 27:22 尪姨: Hng.
對。
Yes?
- 27:24 我: Ah sī àn cháoⁿ sit-sàn ê? Lo chhun lín nng-ê lâi chiūⁿ-hōaⁿ.
那, 是怎麼失散的? 只剩你們兩個上岸。
How did you lose each other? Did only two of you land here?
- 27:27 尪姨: Bô là, chhit-ê lóng ū chiūⁿ-hōaⁿ là.
不是啦, 七個都有上岸。
No, all seven managed to get ashore here.
- 27:28 我: Lóng ū chiūⁿ-hōaⁿ oh, hòⁿ.
都有上岸。
All of them reached here?
- 27:32 尪姨: Chhit-ê lóng ū chiūⁿ-hōaⁿ là.
七個都有上岸。
All seven reached here.
- 27:33 我: Án-ne ê ì-sù sī kóng ū chhit-ê A-l...t-chó'lo?
那意思就是說有七個阿立祖了吧
So does that mean you have seven Alizou (gods)?
- 27:37 尪姨: Hèⁿ chhit-ê A-l...t-chó'là.
對, 七個阿立祖。
Yes, seven of them.
- 27:39 我: Lóng cha-bó-ê mā?
都是女的嗎?
Are you all female?
- 27:40 尪姨: Lóng cha-bó-ê.
都是女的。
(Yes) they are all female.
- 27:41 我: Iá-m-ko ū chit-ê bün-tê tō sī kóng, ū ê A-l...t-chó'nā-ē sī cha-po-ê? Chhiūⁿ-kóng hái...
可是, 有個問題也就是說, 有些阿立祖怎麼會是男的? 就像是 ...
But I still have one question: how can some Alizou be male? For example.
- 27:46 尪姨: Hiàng-thâu là. Hiàng-thâu he sī A-l...t-chó' chhú ê lá. M̄-sī..
是向頭。向頭那是阿立祖取的。不是...
Hiang-tau [male shamans]. Hiang-tau [male shamans] can be selected by Alizou, not.
- 27:56 向頭: Hái-chó'.
海祖。
Hai-zu [another term for a male shaman].
- 28:00 我: Hòⁿ, hènⁿ, tióh-là hái-chó'.
哦, 對, 是海祖。
Oh, right, that's Hai-zu.
- 28:06 尪姨: He sī A-l...t-chó' chhú ê lá.
那是阿立祖取的。
They are selected by Alizou.
- 28:08 我: He m̄ sī in-ūi lín chí-mōai á ū chit-ê sī cha-po-ê nih?
那不是因為你們姐妹裏有個是男的?
Isn't it because one of the sisters is [actually] a male?
- 28:10 尪姨: Bô là, lóng cha-bó-ê là.
不是啦, 都是女的啦。
No, all are female.
- 28:16 我: Chhiáⁿ-mng íá lí sī te kúi ê, a i sī te kúi ê haⁿ?
請問, 那你是第幾的, 啊她是第幾的?
Then, can I ask which number are you? And which number is she [the male postman, who is in trance]?
- 28:17 尪姨: Góa oh?
我嗎?
Who, me?
- 28:18 我: Hèⁿ.
是。
Yes.
- 28:19 尪姨: Góa sī te saⁿ ê, i mā te saⁿ ê, i kah góa siang-seⁿ là.
我是老三, 她也是老三, 我們是雙胞胎。
I am the 3rd [sister] and she [male shaman] is also the 3rd [sister] – we are twins.
- 28:23 我: Án-ne oh!
是這樣哦!
Oh really!
- 28:25 尪姨: Hèⁿ là.
是的。
That's right.

Further examples of channelled language are the notes that the shaman writes for people who consult her – as âng-î 尪姨 Chén – for advice at the temple (see Figure 5). The inscriptions that she makes on these notes are akin to glossolalia in that neither she nor the recipient can read them. They do not use Chinese – or any other known – orthography, but ritualise the interaction between the consulter and Alizou. Later, the recipients burn them.



Figure 5. Showing âng-î 尪姨 Chén ‘writing’ a message from Alizou.

Getting the message out

Compared to Australia, where one of us (David) works with Indigenous languages, Taiwan has a relatively positive and healthy public representation of its Aboriginal communities and languages. Positive stories about Aboriginal communities appear regularly in broadsheet newspapers; the Taiwanese government supports a Council of Indigenous Peoples, reserves seats in the national parliament for Aboriginal representatives, and formally recognises 16 Aboriginal languages – the majority, although not all, of the self-identified Indigenous groups.⁴ Prominent among the non-recognised groups are the Pingpu (plains) peoples of the southwest. Like other settler-colonial societies, Taiwan’s mainstream finds it harder to acknowledge Indigenous people who were the victims of the earliest phases of colonisation. Today, the Pingpu peoples, including the Siraya communities of the Tainan region, have been

advocating for recognition.

As part of this advocacy at ground-level, the Hoan-á-chhân Sirayan community expressed to us their keenness to share their culture and activities with us and the “eyes and ears” that we can reach; as researcher/linguists, this typically means academic audiences. Early in the project’s discussions with the community we asked about sensitivities and wishes in regard to sharing and making public various documentation recordings we were making. As part of this ‘ethical protocol’ framework we also provided copies of all the video recordings to key community members (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009, Nathan & Fang 2009). Due to their desire for advocacy and recognition – amplified by a wish to be distinguished from neighbouring communities who have adopted Christianity – Chén Qiū-yàn 陳秋燕 and her family encouraged us to disseminate our documentation work. As a result of our most recent fieldwork with them in June 2019, we have agreed to collaboratively create a website which will include video of previously unrecorded cultural events, especially shamanic displays, in order to potentially reach a wider audience.⁵

Media such as video is a powerful tool for portraying a community and its cultural activities, especially for researchers who are otherwise over-enthused about reducing rich cultural expressions to anonymised written interpretations. Video and audio are especially valuable for community members themselves, who can directly recognise and relate to people (relatives) and places (their own localities), without mediation and processing by academics.

Conclusion

This particular Sirayan community’s cultural and communicative practices use languages ranging in form from written to spoken to chanted, and from esoteric and ephemeral writing to a suppressed majority language, and to the dominant national language. The closer the languages are to the hearts of the community, the more they have become ‘ghost languages’

⁴ See <https://www.apc.gov.tw> (accessed 29-06-2019).

⁵ The website is located at <http://www.speaktaiwanese.com/siraya/>

– experienced in increasingly limited contexts, endangered and rarely documented.

Portrayal of Aboriginal languages has played a political role in Taiwan. They can be invoked to either differentiate Taiwan from China in order to support efforts to guard independence, or to argue for ‘unification’ on the grounds that Taiwan has very deep cultural connections roots in China. (The latter argument is rejected by Adelaar since Aboriginal roots in what is now southern China go back long before there was any entity resembling China; Adelaar 2014).

However, the texts and discussion here have principally aimed to honour the community’s request to share some of their history with mainstream Taiwan society in its dominant language, while at the same time valorising Taiwanese by presenting speech written directly in the language in which it was spoken. Information in the form of video, conveying community accounts and shaman practices in a direct and compelling way, will be publicly available on the web.

We might feel surrounded by languages that loudly dominate, but many people’s identities and the nuances of their daily life are built on layers of fragile languages. When we asked 佺姨 Chén to name the most important challenge for their community, she replied: “language”. She expressed the hope that one day all the Alizou sisters could reunite, and through combining their various talents, gift their community its true language once again.

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