

Divining Siraya: Sources of language and authority in documentation and revitalisation

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*Introduction*¹

In this paper, we present a short, preliminary and somewhat speculative account of attempted language documentation amongst some Siraya people in south-western Taiwan. The work was initiated in an attempt to support nascent revitalisation efforts in a particular community. It was deeply enmeshed with processes of consultation and collaboration, so that ultimately the dynamics of consultation and collaboration became inseparable from the documentation activities themselves.

Recent discussions in documentary linguistics have raised the bar for ethical and collaborative relationships between documenters and the documented (e.g. Czaykowska-Higgins 2009, Linn 2011, Yamada 2011). These relationships are no longer aimed only at ensuring fairness, but are now also seen as important dynamics in the conception, conduct and outcomes of projects.

The present paper focuses on segments of the Sirayan community in the Tainan area (south western Taiwan - see Map 1), and in particular on interactions with two local village shamans. Siraya is an indigenous language of Taiwan, once spoken in the Tainan area of south-western Taiwan. Taiwan originally had over 25 indigenous languages; today 10, including Siraya, are extinct, and most of the remaining languages are severely threatened. Following Dutch colonisation of the area in the mid 1600s, “Siraya gradually lost its importance and became extinct at the beginning of [the] last century due to the influx of Chinese” (Adelaar 2012:1, 7).

Meili Fang made initial contact with an elderly, disabled village shaman, Mr D.² He had recently retired from the role as shaman, and handed it onto his son, Mr G, who had been reluctant to take on the role. Nevertheless, he appeared to be tirelessly diligent and devoted to the continuance of the shamanic traditions and practices, and had spent so far about two years performing it. Initial discussions resulted in a proposal to support revitalisation efforts through combining Meili’s pedagogical expertise with linguistic resources provided by, or via, village shamans. It was thought that the shamans, as exponents of their traditional culture, might have some vestigial language knowledge; or more interestingly (and more controversially) that in their trances the shamans could channel knowledge from their god (Alizou).³ The notion of revitalisation through god-sent knowledge provides an anchor around which pivot a number of interesting elements of documentation practices and community identity, language and revitalisation ideologies. The central one was that the shamans, on behalf of their community, consulted god on several occasions to divine not only overall approval for the documentation activities, but also to answer questions about methodology. In this way, community (or divine?) control has played a major role in deciding the course of the work.

¹ This work could not have taken place without the generous collaboration of many Sirayan community members, who allowed us to share in their community life and took risks in doing so. This paper has also benefited from discussion with several colleagues, who we thank: Alexander Adelaar, Antonello Palumbo, Gerhard Kosack-Mueller, Michael Sillelidis, Victoria Rau, and Peter Austin.

² In this paper we have anonymised most names and places because there are potential sensitivities and ongoing dynamics whose revelation which might encroach on the comfort of some of the actants.

³ Alizou is the word for ‘god’ in Taiwanese. In the remainder of this paper, we use the term ‘god’ without qualification to refer to the community’s god-concept. Note that the shamans were often not directly distinguished from god in commonly heard expressions such as “god said X” which was used in the sense “the shaman reported or channelled god saying X”.

Dynamics emerged around the local community's factions, especially in relation to religion. Currently the main recognised language activity is associated with the Tainan Ping-pu Siraya Culture Association, centring on a family who has been active in language activities, and who have strong ties with Christian churches. The relations between this group and the shamans' communities do not seem entirely harmonious, at least in regard to attitudes toward managing their language heritage. The Tainan group, probably representing the broad majority of the Sirayan communities, has been working in small-scale revitalisation (Adelaar 2012:12) and in researching, developing and publishing language primers and dictionaries. These activities provide them with a conventional credibility, and they have received recognition and funding from the national government for their work. They appear to disapprove of the shamanic traditions of village P, and doubtful of any outcomes resulting from them.

On the other hand, we heard accounts from Mr G and his village group about their struggle to gain recognition and to retain their traditional practices. They connected these with language revival; for example, as a result of shamanic divination, they rejected the Tainan group's language materials as being linguistically unauthentic. It seems that as language has become a locus of identity, each group has identified its own - very different - source of linguistic authority.

Background

The two authors were, at least initially, naive about Sirayan language and culture, about the community's dynamics and wishes, and about prior linguistic research and documentation. While this was not ideal, given the range of issues and dynamics that lie behind the documentation process, it is useful to be made aware of one's limited awareness of the complexity of community-based fieldwork. As the nature of the events and documentation became clearer, we realised that we needed a more ethnographic approach, to be attentive to what is told by the "raw data" of verbal interactions and events without too many overlays of theory.

As a linguist who was born and grew up in Tainan (see Map 1), and had in recent years been exposed to issues in language endangerment and revitalisation, Meili had wished to contribute to language revitalisation close to her own home community. From the outset, interactions, goals and events were suffused with religious themes. The work had begun when Meili fortuitously met the elderly Mr D, who in turn got her in contact with his son Mr G, the current shaman in village G. At the initial meeting, Mr D was disabled and confined to his wheelchair, unable to walk. Following discussion about the

community's aspirations for language reclamation/revitalisation, Mr J rose from his wheelchair, approached the prayer-shrine, and went into trance, with much weeping and the message that god had been waiting for hundreds of years for the language to awaken. This was seen as a sign



Map: The Tainan area in Taiwan

of divine approval, and that Meili's arrival was somehow god-sent. After that initial event, several planning/discussion meetings took place over the next 6 months, together with many sessions of documentation of shamanic knowledge and activity through video and audio recording.

On community control

One of today's hallmarks of the documentation movement is community control of research. This is exemplified in AIATSIS' *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*, which describes:

Indigenous peoples' ... rights to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, including their traditional knowledge, traditional cultural expressions and intellectual property

(AIATSIS 2011:6). Community control of research goals, methods and outcomes has been hailed as an ethical advancement and a feature distinguishing documentation from language description. It certainly represents a departure from typical "colonial" approaches where researchers arrive with fixed research goals often of little relevance to the life of the language in its community. However, documentation is not the same as research - it encompasses a variety of activities such as media capture and production, archiving and dissemination, rather than emphasis on theory and hypothesis-driven activities. Despite this, many activities now thought of as documentary are directed more at descriptivists and theorists than to communities, for example for revitalisation or other cultural heritage purposes. Admitting an element of community control is not the same as fully embracing it as a methodology or as an intrinsic dynamic of documentation. A full measure of community control would include emic perspectives which could ultimately even make the research/documentation activity inaccessible to the documenter. The context of most documentation projects is a funded project, or thesis data-gathering, which will have laid-down goals, methods and plans. On the other hand, an activity controlled by a community is likely to take paths that reflect (or are actual enactments of) the twists and turns of community life and events (the complexity of those often being amplified by the very internal and external forces that lead to language shift). Insistence that the documenters continue to play particular or predefined roles in communities may prevent true community control.

Documentation activities

The first recording sessions were made at a community festival on 22nd April, 2012. The festival took place at village G and was attended by over 100 people as well as the local press. It included dancing by a group of Siraya women (to pre-recorded songs), and the provision of about 6 large, freshly-killed pigs. Recordings were made using a video camera with an external stereo microphone, and a small audio recorder. Meili was assisted in the recording by her sister. They were permitted close access to Mr G as he performed his shamanic activities, and they filmed approx 2 hours of general events plus the shaman preparing, praying at the small shrine, and then publicly delivering messages from god to the community.

While the quality of the resulting video is mixed, the factors surrounding its acquisition were indicative of wider aspects of the community's efforts to grapple with language and cultural issues. It appears⁴ that because Meili had been given permission via shamanic trance (i.e. from

⁴ Although we cannot be certain of having the right understanding or of covering all perspectives.

god), that this gave her special privileges. While the local TV station had their (much more professional) cameras and staff at the event, they were kept behind ropes in the audience area, while Meili and her sister were able to track the shaman closely (attempting to get optimal closeness for the microphone and camera). This led to complaints from the TV crew that Meili and her sister kept popping up in all *their* shots - perhaps spoiling the “authenticity” they wanted to capture.

In a later field trip, Meili was accompanied by David, who managed the video and audio recording with assistance from Meili’s nephew. Recordings were made on six occasions over a two week period. Initial recordings were made at the community centre of village G, consisting

of discussion in a little thatched shed (some recorded) followed by attempts to elicit language via shamanic trance. These sessions typically proceeded as follows: in preparation, Meili wrote lists of words and expressions that would be useful for basic language learning. Then, we met with Mr G, community leader Mr W, and occasionally others, to drink tea and discuss background issues and plan what we would do in the session. Recording equipment was then set up in the shrine area.

People then moved into that area, Mr G entered his trance, and Meili attempted the prepared elicitation, which we recorded (community leader Mr W recorded several of these sessions too, on his small camera). Later, we backed up media files, and copied all video onto DVDs which were given to Mr G and his colleague the following day.



Image: The small shrine at village G where many of the recordings were made. Divine permission was given to place the video camera within the shrine.

After the second recording session, we all felt that because the shaman was directing his visual attention and voice towards the small shrine, but we were recording from the side, the recordings were not as good as they could be. So the next evening’s elicitation was preceded by discussion, and then divination by means of casting betel nuts to determine whether our camera and microphones could be placed inside the shrine itself. Permission was granted, so we carefully set up the recording equipment at the back of the shrine, facing the shaman as he performed his trances.

After the next three recording sessions, we were told that we were also to record sessions involving Mr G together with another shaman, Miss K, a woman of approx 42 years of age, with 30 years of experience as a shaman for village K. Discussion of this proposal provided us with further understanding of the community’s spiritual beliefs. “True” shamans are female, and they channel female gods. By working with the two shamans, we would be able to observe them channelling the two female gods (who are twins). Subsequently we recorded two such sessions, conducted at Miss K’s village. These were more widely attended, with an informal audience of about 20 community members. They took a less structured form, with Miss K providing much information about the cultural history and context of the Sirayan people, the role of shamanism, and their community’s views about language.

At the end of the recording sessions, various community members approached Miss K to ask for advice about health and other personal matters. Meili's nephew also approached her to ask about his father's ill-health, to which she responded that she would visit their home the next morning. So we ended up making further recordings of two additional sessions when Miss K, together with a couple of her friends, visited Meili's sister's house and had wide-ranging discussions about Siraya



Image: Filming the two shamans. Note other community members also recording

history, culture, and current community dynamics. We were allowed to record these sessions. With further work on transcribing and translation, it is expected that these recordings will yield considerable information about the topics covered from the perspective of a senior and experienced shaman.

In the most recent meeting, Meili met members of village G and presented preliminary results, including noting that the god-sent utterances did not seem to be either internally consistent nor consistent with other sources. This chimed with the Mr G's feelings that it is difficult for him to take responsibility for the language's fate. He explained that his difficulty was the result of being spoken to by gods from different times - sometimes from 400 years ago, sometimes from 800 years ago, and thus the language he was receiving was all mixed up. He also stated that while he wants to follow god's wishes for the language, he also has to survive in the complex politics of his wider community. At the point of writing, shaman G wishes to put all these activities on hold, and his community will again explore using the learning materials produced by the Tainan group.

Parallels and contrasts

Reflecting on this documentation work, we found interesting parallels and contrasts. The two Sirayan groups we have described here have parallel application of religion to language issues, despite one being Christian and the other "pagan" followers of shamanism. We have already illustrated village G community's adherence to shamanism through divining god's permission for various activities and through attempts to revitalise their language through the shaman's devotional trances. They also derive metalinguistic concepts from god, such as their rejection of the Tainan community's language learning materials, and their claim (attributed to god) that theirs is not an Austronesian language but one that emerged from China.⁵ Finally we must note their robust attachment to the shamanic form of religious expression long after the language itself has been extinguished. When we turn to the Tainan community (who seem to distance themselves from the village G community's shamanism), we find again religious themes at the core of their approach to language. Most striking is that there is a strongly religious flavour to Mr P's facility with Siraya. His native language is Bisayan, from the Philippines, and because

⁵ This belief is not necessarily inconsistent with mainstream views about the place of origin of Austronesian languages, which may well be in China. See Adelaar 2005:3.

that is an Austronesian language, one might expect him to find some aspects of Siraya intelligible. However, we find his ability described as amplified as if by miracle:

One day he found himself capable of interpreting the Siraya version of The Book of Matthew by the Dutch Missionary Daniel Gravius due to the fact that his mother tongue belongs to Austronesian languages. very often he likes to refer to this amazing encounter he experienced as a kind of revelation - to seek to find the mother land for Austronesian languages that is called Taiwan.

(Huan-Jhih Su 2008:xxv). Secondly, there is an ambiguity in Mr P's affiliation with the Christian Church. Adelaar (2005:7) describes him as a Protestant minister, and there are several references on the World Wide Web to his Christian worship through Sirayan song and language over the last decade; however, Mr P himself denies that he is a minister (pc). Thirdly, the language learning materials produced by Mr P's association contain references to Judeo-Christian concepts and paint a clear contrast between a pre-Christian Sirayan society and the more "educated" one that followed it. This is also understandable in the broader context of Aboriginal communities in Taiwan; they have a relatively strong attachment to Christianity, with the majority being Christian as contrasted with about 4% among the general population. Finally, of course, the materials underlying all their work are the Christian gospels translated by Daniel Gravius in 1661 (Adelaar 2005:11) and used as a source for the work of Adelaar (2005, 2012) and Macapili (2008).

Meili's family's interactions with the shamans draw attention to the relationship between their respective communities, and how this might be relevant to their collaboration. It became clear, for example, that Meili's family was very willing to "believe in", and argue for, the authenticity, or even the literal truth, of the shamans' connections with gods. These beliefs were exhibited by the request to Miss K to advise them regarding family health matters, and her subsequent visits to the family. At the same time, the family was also keen to test the veracity of the shaman's advice, and much discussion ensued within the family about what healing powers the shamans actually had, and what levels of belief the various family members held. From the other direction, it also appeared that the Sirayan community members "checked out" Meili's family - for example, a delegation appeared at Meili's parents' house to drink tea - and it seemed to be positive for them that the family is a genuinely local, humble, Hoklo/Taiwanese family (as opposed to a Mandarin-speaking family associated with the arrival of the



Image: Sirayan cultural markers: pigs (skulls), bleeding tubes, betel nuts and beer.

nationalists/Kuomintang in 1949). Ultimately it appears, at least to Nathan as a naive outsider and brief observer, that there are relatively few socioeconomic distinctions between the Sirayans that we encountered and the wider community. There are some apparent markers of cultural distinction, like the preference for pigs and their blood as either raw (Siraya) or cooked (Hoklo), and of course the Sirayan shamanistic tradition. Nevertheless, shamanistic practices are also common amongst other Taiwanese communities (Marshall 2006), and it is clearly possible for religious beliefs to “cross over” as exhibited by Meili’s family’s willingness to engage with Sirayan beliefs and a puzzling (at least, to a western mind) ambiguity about which or whose god is referred to. Perhaps such syncretism is unsurprising given the long history of contact between the two communities since colonisation by the Dutch in the 1600s, and the strong likelihood of shared ancestry as evidenced by levels of shared DNA (Adelaar 2005:4).

What are they speaking? the Ba:bwi puzzle

In this paper, we do not attempt to resolve the status or “accuracy” of the utterances produced by the shamans as instances of the Sirayan language. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, under language shift, a language’s resources contract and are affected by transfer from the dominant language(s), which already occurred completely in the Sirayan case at least 100 years ago (Adelaar 2005:7).⁶ Secondly, we feel that any “contemporary” Sirayan that will arise as a result of language revival is validated through the choices and judgements of its speakers as they actually use the language or manage its resources. Thirdly, we as authors are not schooled either academically or locally in the traditions of shamanic trance and ritual, so we cannot make any assumptions about whether or not the Shamans’ god-sent utterances would be in any “standard” Sirayan dialect, a special sacred version, an obfuscated version, or in a kind of glossolalia (“talking in tongues”) such as found in charismatic Christian events (notwithstanding community assumptions at the outset of the project that the shaman would be able to produce language learning resources).

Nevertheless, our preliminary observations are that the trance utterances of Mr G do not exhibit the kind of properties one might expect of an everyday language. Comparing broadly transcribed samples with existing sources (Macapili 2008, Adelaar 2005, 12) provides few if any correspondences. Nevertheless, we found one interesting instance, which may give a pointer for future work. In a visit to another Sirayan community, our Sirayan guide mentioned that a couple of Sirayan words were still in use, notably the word for “pig” /ba:bwi/. Retention of this word as a marker of ethnic identity could be expected as pigs seem to such an important role in Sirayan religious and secular life. This word appears in the Macapili dictionary (2008 - although only in the finderlist, rather sloppily, it does not appear in the main body as a lexical entry), and is identical to the proto-Austronesian reconstruction for the same word (Rau, pc). Subsequently, Meili elicited from Mr G while in trance the word for “pig”, to which he responded /ba:p/ (with final consonant unaspirated). We found this interesting because while on the one hand /ba:p/ is a quite possible outcome of language change processes, on the other hand, it is also sufficiently *different* from /ba:bwi/ to suggest that Mr G did not himself personally know the word. This then, does raise the question of where the knowledge of the form /ba:p/ comes from, and of what epistemological status should be attached to it.

⁶ Adelaar (2012:3) reports that Paul Li “believes that the language already became extinct about two centuries ago”.

Languages present, past and putative

To this point we have not detailed which languages were used in the various events we have described. Almost all of the communication was conducted in Taiwanese (aka Hokkien, Hoklo, Minnan). While virtually all of the participants were also fluent speakers of Mandarin Chinese, there seem to be certain historical, political and identity factors leading to Aboriginal people expressing a preference for Taiwanese. As noted above, it is not clear that the Siraya language was evident in the trance talk of Mr G. With the possibly exception of /ba:p/ we could not correlate any of the vocabulary of that elicited material with existing sources. Nor were elicited responses consistent over different sessions. There does not appear to be any evidence of expected morpho-grammatical patterns. Further analysis is needed to compare other linguistic aspects, for example, the phoneme inventory of trance talk with the historical sources for Siraya and likely sources of interference.

Discussion

In 2012, linguist Laura Robinson circulated an online survey “intended to help uncover the factors that lead to successful collaboration between documentary linguists and community members whose languages they document”. Her survey exemplifies the kinds of criteria implied by a “strong” version of community control. Below are some excerpts from that survey.

9. How did you first become involved with this language?

- I am a community member
- language is spoken near where I live (or used to live)
- speakers contacted me directly
- speakers contacted someone else who suggested I work on the language
- field methods class
- chose it without knowing any speakers

By providing a scale ranging from being a member of the relevant community member through to not knowing any speakers, Robinson has, whether purposely or not, set up a scale of collaboration according to the researcher’s level of belonging to or affiliation with the language community or their area. The following question in the survey asks about community members’ attitudes towards the documentation, with possible responses ranging from excited to suspicious to hostile. Later in the survey, Robinson asks a more provocative question, about whether the researcher has been involved in various processes and activities, including the following:⁷

- conducted research that was initiated by a community member who did not have graduate school experience
- changed a plan of research to meet the needs or wishes of community members, speakers, and/or community leaders
- collaborated with community members on a project that was not language-related

Here, Robinson equates a strong version of community collaboration with (a) the ability of a researcher to respond to ideas initiated by the community, (b) to respond to changes in the course of the work, and (c) ultimately to find the work plans turned in different directions,

⁷ Some of the options have been deleted to save space and to retain focus on the topic of this paper.

possibly even no longer applicable to the linguist's research purposes. These three situations turned out to define our interactions with the Sirayan village community. Although Meili initiated contact, it was with a broad offer to "help in revitalisation". As a result of ongoing discussions, the idea of producing language examples through Mr G's shamanic trance emerged. This meant that knowledge and performance were produced on the community's terms, or, from the community's (emic) perspective, on god's terms, mediated by the shaman and his colleagues. Furthermore, explicit procedures were invoked to determine permissions for Meili to collaborate in such work, procedures that were conducted within the community's world-view and shamanic performances, consisting of Mr G's trance divination and throwing of sacred betel nuts. Such procedures were used to inform decisions ranging from whether the work should go ahead at all, to whether certain language materials could be used in revitalisation, to whether our microphone and video camera were allowed to be placed within the sacred shrine in order to produce higher quality recordings. Thus, not only was there a very high level of community control, but it was exerted through very explicit, performative events, that not only determined but also demonstrated decisions, using methods that we ourselves had no access to. Because these methods were used to make decisions about permissions and activities, community members took maximum control of decisions and outcomes.

Our interactions were also marked by changes of plan according to the wishes of community members. At one meeting, community leader Mr W suggested that we meet Mr P, of the Tainan group already involved in Siraya revitalisation, and talk about revitalisation in collaboration with them. Had we subsequently begun working with them, it would have resulted in us taking an entirely different approach, not least due to that group's strong Christian emphasis. After our meeting with Mr P we felt it was better to persevere in working with village G people. Subsequent discussion back at village G seemed to indicate that they had been "testing our loyalty" and our willingness to continue working with them and their shamanic activities.

Conclusions

This paper has described events and issues in making documentary recordings of shamans' explanations and their unique verbal trance genre. We hope to have shown that collaboration is an intrinsic, and possibly an unpredictable dynamic, not merely a template for skills transfer or "giving back" recorded materials (Nathan and Fang 2009:6). Looking back on the events, it becomes clearer that the close and intense connections between the various actants, and their often fragile relationships to language and culture, mean that the research could be seen as a study in methodology for dealing with vulnerability and risk; ultimately a study in avoiding harm.

This paper has also compared the stances of the two groups we worked with, and how the rhetoric of language intertwines with that of religion and culture. While one group has access to language resources but is thoroughly Christianised (the Tainan group), the other is desperately seeking language but retains their robust indigenous spiritual tradition. While language documenters often maintain that language and culture are inseparable (e.g. Harrison 2007), in the stances of these two groups, language and culture are apparently irreconcilable.

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