

Winning a Place in the History of Taiwan: The Siraya

John R. Shepherd

Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, USA

In the last decades of the twentieth century studies of the Siraya plains aborigines of southwest Taiwan emerged as a serious subfield of academic research in history and anthropology. In the same period Siraya communities have revitalized their traditions and rituals and claimed a significant role in the larger history of Taiwan. To an extent, the resurgence of academic interest and the reassertion of Siraya identity stimulated the growth of one another. But more importantly, both of these developments have come in response to a changing intellectual and political environment and the resurgence of Taiwanese identities that directed greater attention to Taiwan's local history (both before and after the lifting of martial law). Some of the first to respond to these changing political currents were the print journalists and visual media who increasingly found in the Siraya stories that had mass appeal. In this environment, the contributions of subgroups, non-Han Austronesian peoples, as well as Hakka and Hoklo, to the creation of Taiwanese society gained greater historical significance, as new grand narratives of Taiwan's history were created.

This paper serves a dual purpose. It will review both academic studies of Siraya, and secondly, the contributions of government and local community-based Siraya groups to new forms of knowledge. The academic studies under review come from a diversity of fields (archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, history) and deal with every period, from the prehistoric and Dutch, the Zheng and Qing, up to the Colonial and Republican eras. My interest in this first section will focus on the growing depth and quality of knowledge about historical transformations in Siraya society, from a narrower scholarly point of view, rather than on the broader intellectual climate, which receives greater attention in the second part of this review.

Funding from government units, e.g., cultural and community development offices at the local level, and from universities and research institutes at the national level, has helped support many of these efforts. This reflects both Taiwan's greater prosperity and the increasing interest of the larger society in celebrating the unique aspects of Taiwan's history. For politicians, it also reflects electoral and interest group politics, and a tendency to appropriate Siraya history to serve identity politics and nationalist agendas.

In Siraya communities, locally based activists and intellectuals led the way in transforming the historical consciousness of Siraya. Siraya communities now proudly display their rituals, history and traditions both to outsiders and to their own youth, in whom they seek to instill pride in a unique identity. Local and county-level museums have been built to commemorate and teach their history. No longer do Siraya maintain their traditions in private, embarrassed by the aspersions cast by outsiders. They have recast and recreated traditions by building not only on documentary sources but on oral histories, legends, and customary practices.