ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES OF TAIWAN: THE CASE OF SIRAYA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the indigenous or Formosan (indigenous) languages of Taiwan, with special attention to Siraya. It provides a survey of these languages detailing their numbers of speakers, spread, vitality and genetic affiliations (vis-à-vis each other as well as within the wider context of Austronesian languages elsewhere).

The paper also explains the tremendous importance of these languages for Southeast Asian archaeology, for typological linguistics and nowadays even for Taiwanese politics and nationalism.

One of the Formosan languages, Siraya, is now extinct, although it was once one of the most widely spoken languages in Taiwan. Dutch missionaries made extensive use of it in their initially successful efforts to convert the island to Protestantism. It is also the oldest documented Formosan language and it had a written tradition in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Recently efforts have been made to make a linguistic description of Siraya, while some members of the Siraya community in Tainan Province have been trying to revive it.