Alexander Adelaar


Siraya is a Formosan language of South West Taiwan that was extinct but efforts have been made to revive it. Hence, Adelaar calls it a dormant language. His documentation of the Siraya language consists of a grammar sketch, a word list, and a text—ten chapters from Gravius’ translation of the Gospel of St. Matthew. Documentation on Siraya is most welcome not only because the language is interesting in itself but because Formosan languages are vital for historical linguistics. Of the great genetic diversity of Formosan languages relative to the Malayo-Polynesian branch of Austronesian, many linguists believe that (South China and) Taiwan formed the heartland and dispersal centre of the Austronesian language family.

There are some Siraya word lists collected by Japanese linguists after the Japanese occupation of Taiwan in 1895, when Siraya was on its very last legs and there are also 170 land contracts in Siraya, made up between 1663 and 1818. The most important sources for Siraya, though, stem from the seventeenth century Dutch VOC (East India Company) period: a Siraya Gospel of St. Matthew, a Siraya catechism, a 35-page Dutch-Siraya word list and four short dialogues between school children. Adelaar used these seventeenth century VOC texts to extract as much information as possible on the Siraya language. He is fully aware of the risks involved in using such limited and very problematic data. But the result is very satisfying and this book is a significant contribution to the documentation of Formosan languages.

I have a few minor criticisms. In the introductory chapter Adelaar pictures pastors such as Gravius, the translator of Matthew in Siraya, as missionaries and he describes the VOC representatives and the missionaries as two different groups. But Gravius was, in fact, a VOC employee, and if we want to use the
term missionaries for VOC pastors of the seventeenth century at all, it should be clear that their role, position, and tasks were very different from missionaries of later centuries. The VOC employed Dutch pastors on most of their trade posts all over Asia. This was a contractual obligation. The Republic signed contracts with the VOC in which the VOC received trade monopolies in the East but was also burdened with a number of government tasks including the ‘conservatie van het publieke geloof’ (protecting and maintaining the public faith), in the words of the Octrooi (Contract) of 1623. This theocratic protection of the Calvinistic faith was strictly limited to the VOC trade posts and the areas of direct territorial control around it. Just as in the Republic back home, in the East no other form of religion was tolerated in the public domain than the Reformed Church, and the VOC, representing the Republic in this regard, was supposed to build Reformed churches and schools within their jurisdiction to enable church services for VOC personnel, VOC slaves, clients and dependents, and their children. Local ‘heathens’ within the jurisdiction of the VOC, were encouraged or forced, sometimes with a system of fines or other sanctions, to stop their ‘false’ religious practices and become Calvinists. The VOC schools were a key element in the implementation of the theocratic duty of the state to ‘protect the public faith’. The pastors in the East, therefore, were employees of the VOC, under strict control of the VOC, and not independent missionaries, sent by religious communities. They performed two functions: to serve as pastors for the VOC personnel, and to carry out the state duty of protecting the public faith that the Octrooi imposed on the VOC in areas under her jurisdiction.

The Bible translations in Malay, Portuguese, Siraya, and other languages spoken in VOC areas are rather literal renderings of Dutch Bible translations. Most of these VOC translations have a Dutch version in the left column and the ‘VOC language’ version in the right. I write ‘VOC language’ because the kind of language in the VOC translations that I studied, Malay versions, is coloured by interference from the Dutch Bible and by the idiolect of the Dutch translators and I assume this is true for Siraya as well. It is therefore a pity that the text edition of Adelaar does not contain the seventeenth century Dutch text of the Statenbijbel, (State’s Bible, Dutch authorized version) but a heavily modernized Dutch version of the Statenbijbel with different syntactic structures from the Dutch base text that Gravius used. For example, the construction ‘in de dagen van den koning Herodes’ that Adelaar gives (Matthew 2:1) is rather different from the construction ‘in de dagen des Conincks Herodis’ that formed the input for Gravius. The double negation of the seventeenth century Statenvertaling (Dutch authorized version) is also lost (for example Adelaar’s version in Matthew 5:26: gij zult daar geen zins uittkomen; seventeenth century versions: ‘ghy en sult daer geenszins uytkomen’).