

Naruwana and Atoana: Saaroa Toponyms in the context of grammar and ethnicity

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Saaroa people have populated the valley along the upper flow of Laonong river and the hills around it in southern Taiwan for many centuries, if not for thousands of years. Their life, traditions, ceremonies and all their narratives are embedded in and pegged down to that geographical fauna and flora, their geographical and clan names clearly and concretely referring to that particular physical environment.

Saaroa is at the top of the sub-grouping tree of Austronesian, among the Tsouic languages, and Taiwan is considered as the homeland of these languages. Seen together with neighboring Tsou and Kanakanavu, they provide an authentic case of Austronesian spatial deictic and naming system, including the directional morpheme components of verbs and their derivations.

During a lexical documentation project extending over the past 20 years, we were able to find the most complete record of all toponyms possible, comprising hundreds of items.

In my presentation, intend to give an overview of the place-naming strategies and their contribution to the lexicon of Saaroa. I also wish to show an initial categorization of place-names arising from myths, memorable events, geographical peculiarities or describing the particular flora of a place. Several clan names are derived from locations, while some locations carry the name of the family who moved there. Besides, the names show a referring system among themselves, items frequently connect/refer to a place, people and plants concurrently.

The derivation of such names involve reduplication, suffixation, but frequently (and surprisingly) syllable elisions from regularly formed words. The enumeration of these items may bring up some roots hitherto unknown for Austronesian scholars (in both senses of the word). While researchers of grammatical systems used to pay less attention to these toponyms, their preservation and possible explanation in the context of grammar and culture are needed for the understanding and survival of the language.

We have found that all the place-names have their own stories (as far as still recoverable) and are therefore meaningful when used in the ceremonies and traditional tales, they are “speaking names”, and the presentation also plans to give an overview of this work done.

Chinese settlers have been moving into the area over the past century and they have created new names for the places we see on the maps now. Their written characters are pronounced phonetically similar to the original names, however their meanings are products of romantic projections of phantasy on the perceived “wild” aboriginal life before. I wish to show examples of this, so as to emphasize the importance of understanding and preservation of the original, contextually evolved place-names and illustrate, how they manage to survive under this stratum.