

Truku

Introduction to the ethnic group

In early academic circles, scholars categorized the Truku as a sub group of the Atayal when categorizing Taiwanese aborigines because some aspects of their culture and customs bear a slight resemblance to those of the Atayal, and some are even more similar. The Truku was a “sub-group” or a “branch” of the Atayal, and was classified as the eastern Sedek group of the Sedek sub-group under the Atayal ethnic group. However, as early as the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945), scholars had pointed out that this group referred to itself as Sajeq, and its language, culture, and other aspects were different from those of the Atayal. So the group was named “Sajeq” (“Shaji” in Mandarin).

Sejiq means “human being” in the Truku language. The Truku lived in Nantou County originally, and then they gradually migrated to eastern Taiwan in several phases. In the areas where they originally lived, there were several language groups such as the Tkdaya, Truku and Tuuda. Most of the immigrants from Nantao to Hualien were Truku people.

This group has a clear ethnic identity. When encountering outsiders, most of its members state their group identity as Truku, or Tailuge in Mandarin. Many eastern Sedek people participated in the ethnic name restoration movement for decades, strongly asserting their wish to be considered as distinct from the Atayal ethnic group. Even though other minority groups of the eastern Sedek (such as the Tkdaya and the Tuuda) and the western Sedek in the Nantao area do not share the views of this movement, the Truku have finally been recognized by the Executive Yuan as the twelfth aboriginal ethnic group in Taiwan.

Taiwanese aborigines initially had no concept of ethnicity, until they learned it from Japanese rule, modern policies and academic research. Only then did the concept of “ethnic group” became solid in their minds. The new Truku ethnic group includes three branches (Truku, Tkdaya and Tuuda) from the old eastern Sedek and now they are scattered over many towns in Hualien County. The Truku were recognized by the government only less than one year ago. The subsequent effects are worth noting. The Tkdaya and Tuuda’s status in the ethnic group is a key factor.

The concept of ethnicity was imparted by the dominant society, not by members of the inner group, so when the Truku people interacted with other peoples before the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945), the groups based their identity on tribes or language groups. Even though the three language groups now belong to the Truku, they previously hunted one another’s heads or were enemies, just as they dealt with other groups in the Hualien area, such as the Sakiraya (or the Sakizaya, on the Kiray plain), the Kavalan, the Nanshi Amis and the Han Chinese.

The boundaries separating the Truku from other groups are somewhat nebulous. There are two reasons: first, Truku tribes are based on kinship, which built only looser ties among their members, and second, a lack of arable land resulted in segmented tribes. However, groups that split from the same tribe do not necessarily become independent tribes. The decision of whether or not to establish a separate tribe hinges on the interaction between the group and the mother tribe as well as on group members’ subjective identity.

Geographical Distribution

The main settlement area of the Truku or the eastern Sedek is on the eastern side of the Central Range, the catchment area of the Mugua River, the Liwu River, and the Heping River, and it includes

the following administrative divisions in Hualien County: Wunlan Village, Tongmen Village, Shueiyuan Village, Jiamin Village, Jingmei Village, Sioulin Village, Fushih Village, Chongde Village, and Heping Village in the Sioulin Township, and Hongye Village, Mingli Village, Wanrong Village, Jiancesing Village, and Silin Village in Wanrong Township, and Lunshen Village and Lishen Village in Jhuosi Township, and Sikou Village in Shoufong Township, Nan-ao Village, Aohua Village and Jinyang Village in Nan-ao Township, and Cingfong Village, Nanhua Village, and Fusing Village in Jian Township.

Most historical records about the ethnic group were written by early missionaries, colonial officers and scholars during the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945), KMT rule and the present. These studies mainly focused on the Atayal, and treated the Truku as a subgroup of the Atayal, so only cultural and linguistic differences between the Truku (i.e. the eastern Sedek) and the Atayal are mentioned, discussed or compared. There is relatively little research focused exclusively on the Truku, but the amount has increased recently.

In Truku oral history, there are two versions of their myth of origin; one is known as the “wood born and stone born” version (stating that their ancestors were born in a mythical tree which had both the nature of wood and stone), and another one is known as the endless hole version. In fact, the Tkdaya, the Tuuda and the Truku all have different ideas about their place of origin. Bunobong in the south-west of Wunlan Village in Sioulin Township Hualien County is a more widely accepted place of origin.

Researchers also included the group’s oral history when they made written records of the group’s migration history. From the Qing dynasty, through Japanese rule and KMT rule after World War II, the Truku have experienced continuous migration because of warfare among tribes or groups, coercion by the state powers, and due to conditions in the areas where they lived. Generally tribes moved from high mountains to plains regions. In recent years, some Truku people have left their tribes for cities to pursue better lives.

Social Structure and Social Organization

Truku society lacks tight organization. When the Truku migrated toward the east, clans were the basic social unit, so all members in the same tribe were bound by kinship ties, and tribes, in turn, were connected by kinship, forming a dense social network. Tribes segmented easily, which usually happened within less than three generations when members moved out to make a new tribe. Therefore, tribes remained very small. In times of emergency, neighboring tribes with kinship ties would band together in tribal coalitions to defend themselves from enemies.

There were various roles in Truku society, including the chief (and also a vice chief or deputy chief in bigger tribes), elders, clan leaders, messengers and warriors. But some research shows that tribal leaders were usually nominated by outside dominant forces, so they did not have the same power as kinship leaders. When decisions needed to be made, elders and clan leaders were the decision makers.

Kinship plays an important role in Truku society. Tribes are mainly built on this principle. It is also the rule for personal interrelationships. Kinship (lutut) includes both matrilineal and patrilineal ties, as well as affinity. It is a bilateral kinship concept, i.e. emphasizing blood descent rather than gender or marriage. Gaya is a key concept in Truku, and means law, moral, taboo, ritual, custom, regulation, etc. People who are in the same gaya relationship have close kinship and genealogical ties, which is the main method to organize and mobilize tribal members. People of the same gaya take care of each other, help the needy, bear the same punishments, and follow the same orders. The rules of male-female relations are also dictated by gaya.

<http://www.dmtip.gov.tw/Eng/Truku.htm>, also with more information.