

Isaan Storytelling

by Wajuppa Tossa

For centuries storytelling has been important in all levels of society among the Isaan people of Northeast Thailand, who speak a related group of dialects. When a baby is born, fellow villagers visit, entertaining themselves by reading stories from palm-leaf manuscripts, reciting or singing verse stories, or narrating tales in prose. Mothers sing lullabies that often tell stories. Grandparents and parents recount folk tales to entertain children and to teach them proper conduct and morals. Children tell stories to each other. At social gatherings such as Buddhist merit-making ceremonies, wedding receptions, ordination ceremonies, and wakes, storytelling or story-singing is a major form of entertainment.

The Buddha used many stories known as the Jataka tales to illustrate his teachings. One of these, called “Thet Mahachaart” or “Bun Phawet,” tells the story of the Buddha’s incarnation as Prince Vessantara. It is told in almost every Isaan village for one day (24 hours) every year in the fourth lunar month. If a devotee can participate in the entire ceremony, from the procession of painted scrolls to the temple through the entire sermon, it is believed he or she will gain a life in the age of the next Buddha, when everyone will be equally healthy, prosperous, and peaceful.

Once performed as a serious reading aloud by a monk or a series of monks, “Bun Phawet” has been

transformed within the past 30 years by the addition of new performance styles and melodies. The changes have pleased audiences and kept them listening from beginning to end.

Thet siang (the sermon of voices) is a style of religious narration in which three to six monks assume different dramatic parts. The performance begins with a summary of the story chanted by the leader both in Pali, the Buddhist language, and in the local Isaan language. Each monk chants the role of his character in a different tune.

Although a recent innovation, the sermon helps preserve the Isaan language and literature. The monks who perform *thet siang* are students of an old Isaan language, as well as ancient forms of Pali and Thai, memorizing old verse stories and composing new ones. *Thet siang* performances are now held in private homes on religious and festive occasions as well as at temples. At least 23 groups of monks perform almost every day in the Isaan region and in Central Thailand. Part of the money earned from performances is used for improving the monks’ living quarters, building new temple meeting halls, and constructing temple water tanks.

The more popular the *thet siang* is, and the more the beauty of the old Isaan language and poetry is heard, the less, it is hoped, will be the feeling of cultural inferiority among the speakers of Isaan dialects, particularly the Lao. And we also hope that the moral content in performances of *thet siang* will enable us all, including the monks, to rise above human lust and greed.

SUGGESTED READING

Tossa, Wajuppa. 1990. *Phadaeng Nang Ai: A Translation of a Thai/Isan Folk Epic in Verse*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press.

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