

# **Narratology in the Isan Mahachat Sung-sermon**

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## **Abstract**

*The sermon text can be regarded as a literary text comprising unique thematic content, meticulously selected diction and distinct compositional form. The core essence of the Vessantara Jataka, known as Mahachat Sermon, and as used in thet laeh or sung-sermon form, lies in revealing the selfless character of the bodhisattva – the epitome of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice. This sermon is deployed by practitioner monks as a tool for stimulating the mind of lay devotees to listen to the story with devotional attentiveness and then apply its moral values in day to day life. In order to delineate the story well and render the narration effective, practitioner monks in Northeast Thailand (Isan) have played a major role in devising different techniques, such as the use of various figures of speech, versification, rhythm, and last but not the least, different narratological techniques. In this paper we focus particularly on the narratological aspects of the Isan Mahachat*

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*Sung-sermon. A representation in art, literature or any other discipline is narrative when its theme unfolds as a chain of episodic events, revolving around a core action which progresses both spatially and temporally. In Isan, monks who have a high range voice train themselves to delineate the entire story of the Vessantara Jataka (in 13 sections) in a unique recital style infused with distinct rhythms. The episodic narration of the story is done in such a way that enables the reader or listener to discover the whole from its parts and vice versa. As performer-narrators, sung-sermon practitioner monks follow the story along each of the thirteen sections known as kantha that totals to one thousand verses or katha expanding over time and space. From our close textual and thematic analysis of the text Phimpha Laeh Mahachat 13 Kantha (Samnuan Isan) composed by the well-known sung-sermon practitioner monk, Ven. Phrakhru Sutasarapimol (Phramaha Phimpha Dhammadino) it has been found that nine distinctive narratological strategies viz., interiorization, cyclicalization, serialization, elasticization of time, spatialization, fantasization, stylization, improvisation, and contextualization are used in the rendition of the entire story. All these strategic devices are restored to by most sung-sermon practitioner monks in order to render vitality, veridicality, conceptual clarity both to the content of the story as well as the actual act of narrativity. In this paper we examine each of these devices by citing examples from the original text in English translations. There is no doubt that all the narratological strategies that are used have a reinforcing effect on the narration of the story. Providing emphasis, freshness of expression, vividness and conceptual clarity, the use of narratological strategies has rendered great vitality to the story and has positively affected the proliferation, preservation and continuation of the vibrant tradition of the Mahachat sung-sermon in Isan as a whole.*

## Introduction

The sermon text can be regarded as a literary text that comprises of distinct compositional form, meticulously selected diction and unique thematic content. The core essence of

the Vessantara Jataka<sup>104</sup>, known as Mahachat Sermon and used in *thetlaeh*<sup>105</sup> or sung sermon form, lies in revealing the selfless character of the bodhisattva – the epitome of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice. This sermon is deployed by practitioner monks as a tool for stimulating the mind of lay devotees to listen to the story with devotional attentiveness and then apply its moral values in day to day life. In order to delineate the story well and render the narration effective, practitioner monks have played a major role in devising different techniques, such as the use of various figures of speech<sup>106</sup>, versification, rhythm, and last but not the least, the art of narrativity. In this paper we focus particularly on narrativity.

A representation in art, literature or any other discipline is narrative when its theme unfolds as a chain of episodic events, revolving around a core action which progresses both spatially and temporally. In the Mahachat sermon, **the core action is centered upon Prince Vessantara**, the Bodhisattva's perfection of the meritorious act of charity or *dana* which began with his generous act of donating the rain-giving white elephant to the drought-stricken denizens of the city of Kalinga, an act that outraged his own subjects and resulted in his banishment from the kingdom by his father, King Sanjaya. His exile expedited the next phase of generous acts that unrolled initially with whole-hearted donation of all his earthly and palatial belongings to suppliants from every stratum of society and eventually culminated

<sup>104</sup> Of the 547 Buddhist stories (Jatakas) illustrating the previous lives of the Buddha, the Vessantara Jataka known as Mahachat in Thai (meaning Great Birth) is the most popular in Thailand and has long since been delineated in both poetry and pictorial arts.

<sup>105</sup> *Thet Laeh* is a form of applied sermon in which some sort of rhythm is used during actual delivering of the sermon and so in English we have named it 'sung-sermon' in order to distinguish it from other sermons that are delivered in a plain manner without infusion of any rhythm. *Thet Laeh* or sung-sermon can be classified into two categories – *Thet Mahachat* and Story-based sermon. The delivery of *Thet Mahachat* is restricted to the fourth lunar month, whereas, other story-based sung sermons can be delivered at any time throughout the year. Details of the origin of *Thet Laeh* can be found in the research monograph "A critical study of the Buddhist Sung-sermon from Isan" by the present writer.

<sup>106</sup> Figures of speech both of the *tropes* type i.e. related to general meaning of words such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole, paradox, proverb, didactic interpolation, irony, symbol, imagery, foreshadowing, satire, and pathos and *schemes* type i.e. related to form or shape such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, and onomatopoeia are profusely used in the Mahachat Sermon text. See "An Analysis of figures of speech in the Isan Mahachat Sermon", by Dipti Mahanta in the conference volume of LSCAC, Mahasarakham University, 2010.

with the giving away of his two little beloved children to the glutton Brahmin Jujaka and his wife to the deity Indra, disguised as a human.

This particular Jataka tale which represents the penultimate birth of the Buddha as the Bodhisattva, before being finally born as Gotama Buddha, is extremely popular in Thailand. In Isan, or Northeast Thailand monks who have a high range voice train themselves to delineate the entire story (in 13 sections) in a unique recital style infused with distinct rhythms. As performer-narrators, sung-sermon practitioner monks follow the story along each of the thirteen sections known as *kaan* that totals to one thousand verses or *kaatha* (*Gāthā*) expanding over time and space. The composition of Vessantara Jātaka as appeared in *Thet Mahachat* is as follows:

Kaan	Romanized Title	Translation	Number of verses
1	<i>Thotsaphorn</i>	Ten Blessings	19
2	<i>Himaphaan</i>	Himalayan Forest	134
3	<i>Thaanaakan</i>	Charity/Donations	209
4	<i>Vannaphravet</i>	Entrance into the forest	57
5	<i>Chuchok</i>	Chuchok, the Brahmin	79
6	<i>Julaphon</i>	Sparse Forest	35
7	<i>Mahaaphorn</i>	Thick Forest	80
8	<i>Kumaan</i>	The Royal Children	101
9	<i>Matsi</i>	Masti, Vessantdorn's wife	90
10	<i>Sakkabap</i>	Indra's Words	43
11	<i>Mahaaraat</i>	The Great King	69
12	<i>Chaukrasat</i>	The Six Royals	36
13	<i>Nakhonakan</i>	Return to the Kingdom	48
<b>Total number of verses</b>			<b>1,000</b>

The episodic narration of the story is done in such a way that enables the reader or listener to discover the whole from its parts and vice versa. In this paper we discuss in brief the main distinctive features of sung-sermon narratology that comprises of the following strategies<sup>107</sup>:

1. Interiorization
2. Cyclicalization
3. Serialization
4. Elasticization of time
5. Spatialization
6. Fantasization
7. Stylization
8. Improvisation
9. Contextualization

The nine categories can be grouped into three classes – formal method, content rendition and creative infusion. Interiorization, cyclicalization and serialization falls under the rubric of formal method; elasticization of time and spatialization lie in the group of content rendition and fantasization, stylization, improvisation, and contextualization fall into the category of creative infusion. All these devices are restored to by most sung-sermon practitioner monks in order to render vitality, veridicality, conceptual clarity both to the content of the story as well as the actual act of narrativity. What follows is a brief discussion of each of these categories.

### **Interiorization:**

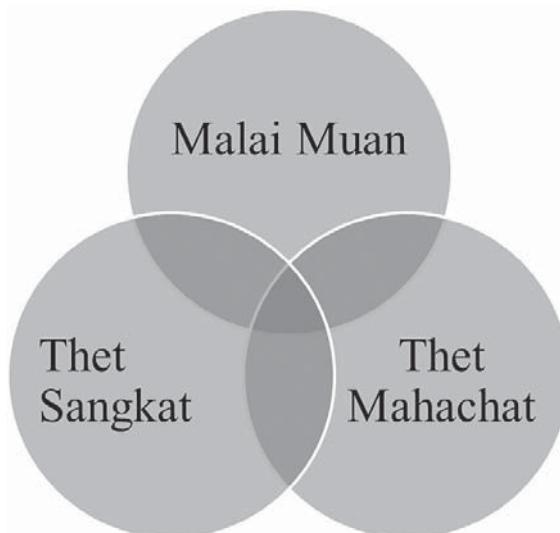
In narratology, interiorization is a special technique or process by which a dialectical relationship between different strands of narration is affected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence<sup>108</sup>. During an actual sung-sermon session practitioner monks, both explicitly and implicitly, draw the listeners' attention to the fact that within the story of Vessantara is the incipient story of the Buddha as an enlightened being, and within that is the story of Buddhahood in every person, and so on and so forth,

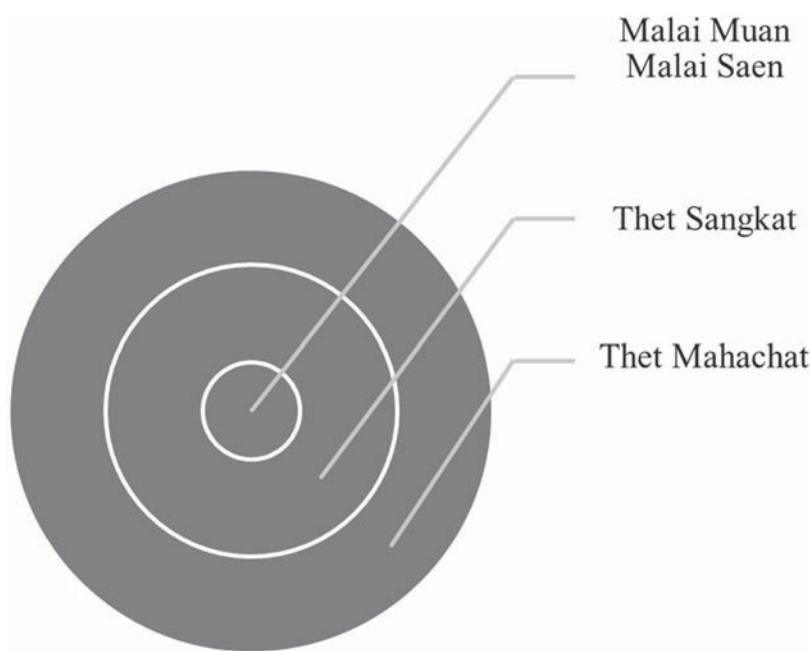
<sup>107</sup> For a discussion of some of these categories in relation to Indian Narratology see K. Ayyappa Paniker's *Indian Narratology* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Lt., 2003).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* p.12.

an apparently endless process of interiorization. The moral lessons that are to be learnt and internalized from the story get reinforced through this process of interiorization. It also sets the trajectory on a logical footing as to the benefits to be derived from the attentive apprehension of the story.

The entire *ThetMahachat* ceremony in Isan comprises of the actual narration of three sermons – *Thet Malai Muan* – *Malai Saen*, *Thet Sungkat*, and *Thet Mahachat*. The interconnection of the three sermons brings to light the significance of the narratological aspect of interiorization – the element of story within a story. The interconnection can be well understood when diagrammatically represented with three concentric circles or kaleidoscopic representation of one circle within the other.





*Malai Muan – Malai Saen* sermon is delivered on the first day i.e. the Mahachat Congregation Day (*Wan Ruam*). This particular sermon depicts the story of the arahant monk, Phra Malai, who having sojourned into the two realms of heaven and hell arrives in the terrestrial world to narrate his experience to the commoner. As the legend goes, during his visit to the celestial abode of deities Phra Malai met the future Buddha, Phra Ariya Mettaiya, who gave him the divine message that any devotee intended upon listening to all the 13 sections of the *Thet Mahachat* on a single day will accumulate great merits that would lead to prospective birth during the time of the future Buddha. Phra Malai brings this celestial message of Ariya Mettaiya to the worldly realm and through the narration of the extraordinary encounter between the future Buddha and Phra Malai, practitioner monks strategically insert the element of faith in the act of listening.

While it is very clear that through the juxtaposition of the sermon of *Malai Muan-Malai Saen*, practitioner monks prepare the ground for instilling faith in the listeners, the delivery of the *Thet Sangkat* on the following day i.e. the Mahachat Sermon Delivery Day (*Wan Thet Mahachat*) helps reinforce the historical reference

point of this faith. Through the *Thet Sangkat*, which is the narration of the biography of the historical Buddha, practitioner monks prepare the ground for logical connection and validation of their sermonizing the story of the Bodhisattva Vessantara in the present era. Phra Malai's message sets the context for the future, *Thet Sangkat* sets the contextual co-relation to the past and finally through the *Mahachat* sermon listeners are inspired to direct their focus on the present moment by taking the glorious example of the Bodhisattva into day to day life through the actual act-of-doing i.e. practicing *dana*.

Apparently there is a logical connection in the three sermonic stages and the narratological aspect is strongly grounded on the dialectical relationship between the act of sermonizing and the actual act of comprehending the embedded meaning/message by the lay devotees. If we expunge the *Thet Sungkat*, the narration of *Thet Mahachat* loses its historicity in its entire phenomenal dimension – the fact that realization of Buddhahood and the origination of Buddhism in general and the Mahachat sermon in particular came into origin through a historical figure, Gotama Buddha. But mere acceptance of historicity of the fact in itself is not enough; cultivation of faith is equally important and indeed indispensable to reach one's goal of attaining buddhahood or supreme perfection. Thus the message of Phra Malai has come to bear an inevitable contextual as well as inter-textual relationship to the Mahachat sermon as a whole. The arahant monk acts as an intermediary between the Enlightened founder in his future form<sup>109</sup> and countless of his yet to be enlightened devotees in

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<sup>109</sup> The historical Buddha is a figure from the past, so there is never any indication that Phra Malai had ever met the Buddha. In fact, such an assumption would be contradictory to the doctrinal teachings on nibbana. The historical Buddha already freed himself from the cycle of birth and death by entering the state of nibbana and even if Phra Malai would have ever wished to meet the Buddha, he would never have had the chance. Suppose he had met, it would be denying the nibbanic achievement of the historical Buddha. But meeting the future Buddha in his celestial abode and bringing the timeless message to the earthly realm, albeit appears too mystical/mythical for skeptics, bears no doctrinal conflict; rather it adds logical progression and sets the tune for the entire setting of the Mahachat Sermon. Drawing inspiration from the life of the historical Buddha one looks forward in time to the future Buddha with great hope. But this hope is not utopian, on the other hand, it is rooted in the present life action – attentive listening to the 13 sections of Mahachat in a single sitting. Whether a lay devotee would succeed in taking a human form during the future Buddha's time is something that cannot be justifiably verified, but the immediate relevance of Phra Malai's message is that it points towards the present moment of

the earthly realm. Phra Malai's intermediary role in the context of the story/narration in a way also highlights the role of practitioner monks seated on elevated preaching chairs and narrating the sermon in the present day context. Just as Phra Malai is significant in communicating the heavenly message to both monks and lay devotees, practitioner monks play the intermediary role of taking the same message to the commoner. The Arahant monk's role justifies the spiritual leadership role of practitioner monks. Had it not been the case, then lay devotees could have easily replaced practitioner monks in narrating the Vessantara Jataka. But this switching of role has never taken place in the entire history of narration of the Mahachat Sermon.

Having instilled faith in the historicity of the whole phenomenon there emerges the realization that prospective future birth during the time of Ariya Mettaiya is a worthy goal that is achievable through the perfection of generosity. Thus there is an organic connection between and amongst the three sermons linked in this way – faith → historicity → practice. But this linking does not strictly follow a linear pattern. In the context of internalization there may be variations among individuals. While the ceremony gets kicked off with the narration of the Malai Muan – Malai Saen followed by Thet Sangkat and finally the Mahachat sermon the process of understanding may follow one's own paradigmatic scheme. While there is no instance of Malai Muan – Malai Saen being preceded by the narration of *Thet Sangkat*, the latter in its second position in sequential order (the reference to the historical Buddha) acts as an adhesive element between faith and call for generosity (a form of moral duty). In other words, the interconnectivity of the three sermons always remains intact and the ultimate emphasis is on gradual progression from faith-building to the acceptance of historicity and finally to the actual involvement in the process of acquiring perfection in merit-making through acts of generosity. That is why, the time devoted to the narration of Thet Mahachat (the story of Vessantara) is the longest among the three sermons although sequentially it comes at the end.

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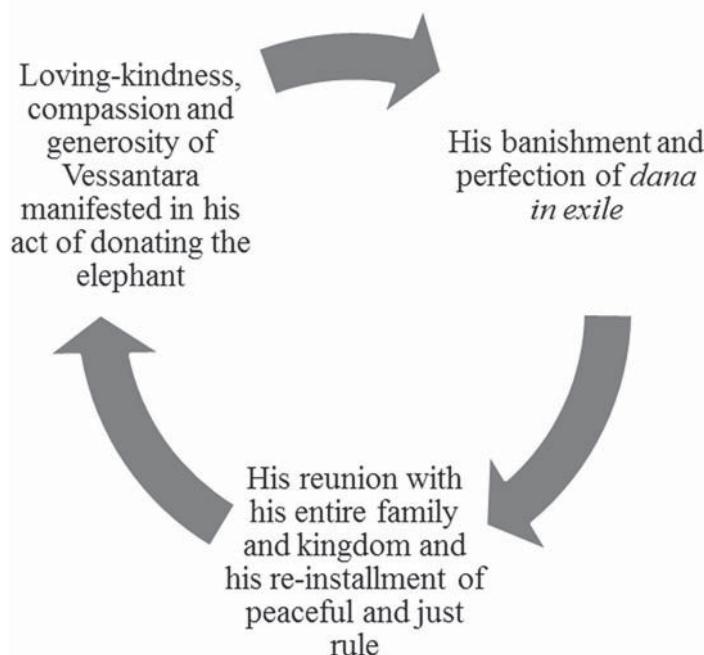
perfecting generosity and so the hope that the message generates in the hearts of lay Buddhists is an action-oriented reasonable hope. In short, this hope captures the entire message of Buddhist pragmatism – living and focusing in the present moment.

## Cyclicalization

Cyclicalization is a regular feature of the Mahachat sermon. Whether cyclical narration is primarily an aspect of Buddhist belief or philosophical outlook on life and existence<sup>110</sup>, for the sung-sermon narrators it has become a handy device for stringing together the one thousand verses of the 13 episodic sections in a particular narrative formula with a fluid notion of forward and backward movement. The placement of the single story of the life of the Bodhisattva in a chain of episodes starting from his giving away of the auspicious elephant, his banishment, his renunciant life and perfection of *dana* while dwelling in the forest, the royal reunion and his final return to the kingdom to rule in peace and with justice cyclically represents the virtuous action of charity and generosity and the resultant benefit that one can accrue for oneself and the community as a whole. The point at which the virtuous action begins extends temporally to merge again at the same meritorious point just like in a cyclical order. In actual rendition of the story, practitioner monks never sidestep this cyclical order of narration. Not only in the Thet Mahachat, cyclicalization as a regular feature also bound the Thet Sangkat and the Malai Muan – Malai Saen. The cyclical order of the entire story/event in the life of Vessantara and the practitioner monks' roundabout narration of it focuses the kammic truth of a wholesome action leading to wholesome results. In the context of the story, although good and generous act of Vessantara initially triggered sorrow and lamentation, it eventually ended up in both individual and communal welfare. The story upholds the timeless Buddhist belief that energy inherent in a wholesome kammic action cannot get destroyed and annihilated even under the effect of unwholesome external events and actions of others. For instance, the complaints of the citizens led to Vessantara's banishment, but this negative event opened up the entire path for great future achievements. Similarly, the presence of the negative elements of endless greed in Chuchok (*Jujaka*) did not ruin Vessantara's family but expedited the process of family reunion and reconciliation of a would-be regent and his once faulted subjects.

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<sup>110</sup> The Theory of Dependent Origination or Paticcasamupada cyclically denotes the process of birth, decay and death with its origin in ignorance (*avijja*).



## Serialization

Serialization implies the structural format of the Mahachat sermon in 13 sections which lay preference for an apparently series of episodes on an equal par to a unified, single-strand, streamlined course of events, centering around the Bodhisattva's life and whatever happened to him on his way to fulfillment of the perfection of *dana*. Although on a single sitting the entire story in all its 13 sections is narrated, there is room for enough episodic looseness that allows for variation in tone and style. There are episodes like the Masti section, Chuchok and Nakhon sections that are generally highlighted contributing to the depiction of the internal richness of human experience adumbrated in this long narrative. The apparent looseness results from the serial nature of the work, which makes certain parts of it collapsible as and when needed, and provides an openness to the text. Although no new item or episode can be added or inserted, just as any old item or episode cannot be removed or eliminated totally, there is great adaptability due to the feature of serialization in narrativity.

The Masti section is usually highlighted due to the element of pathos in it and since most lay listeners of the Mahachat Sermon are usually female devotees, practitioner monks elongate the narration to whatever extent possible. Sung-sermon practitioner monks exploit pathos to a considerably great degree especially in rendering the scene in which Masti tirelessly seeks after her two beloved children: Kanha and Chali. Designed to evoke the feelings of tenderness, pity and sympathetic sorrow from the audience, the scene that depicts pathetic universal situation of a mother's sorrowful longing for her lost children are meticulously rendered:

Masti so tired	and hapless
Sad and distressed	she cried hopelessly
When the evening set in	darkness loomed all over
The three animals disappeared	making the way for her to go
In her hurry she tripped	on a stone and tumbled
In her mind she thought	of only her two children
They had waited	for her for so long
She walked just thinking of them	sometimes in hurrying steps
When the sun set	she arrived home
" Two little gems	mother has come where are you?"
She wondered about her children	where they could be
Every evening she goes to fetch them	from their playing ground
Right and left	in every direction she looked
Whichever way she turned	nothing but emptiness
Tired and lonely	the heart throbbing
When she reached the fence	she left her fruit basket there
Then looked around	but it was all empty and quiet
"Do not be kidding at me	don't hide from me, dear children"

She tried to seek and call them  
 Walking to and fro she sought for them everywhere  
 Sad and depressed not even a shadow could be traced  
 Could the children be kidding away from her in hiding?<sup>111</sup>

### Elasticization of time

Within the conceptual framework of the narrative there exist fluidity or elasticization of time. Narrative time in Mahachat sung-sermon is more psychological in character than logical. Narration, by definition, implies selection, elaboration, condensation, and this process is manifested in the treatment of time. For example, although sung-sermon practitioner monks cover the entire story in one sitting, they do not always focus on each section of the story equally, some sections are simply presented in a condensed form whereas some sections especially the ones through which didactic interpolations can be reflected directly are elongated. For instance, in the first section which opens up the story of the future Bodhisattva, sung-sermon monks emphasize elaborately on the theme of accumulation of merits through charitable acts of generosity. Similarly, in the section on Chuchok, they elaborate another moral theme – the folly of uncontrolled greed by vividly depicting Chuchok's indulgence in a celebratory orgy that resulted in a self-humiliating death. Since the narrative consists of a sequence of events, duration of time is certainly of significance, but not perhaps its actual placement. Didactic interpolations interspersed throughout the Mahachat sermon text direct the listeners to universal truths with an emphasis on realization of these truths and practicing along the moral path. Sung-sermon practitioner monks would devote enough time in the course of delivering the sermon to clarify and repetitiously stress them so as to inspire and encourage the laity to put into real practice in life. The repeated words and phrases in the original Isan version are maintained in our translation below:

<sup>111</sup> Phrakhru Sutasarapimol, *Phimpha Laeh Mahāchat 13 Kantha Isaan version* พิมพาແລ້ມຫາຈາດ ๑๓ ກົມພົກສໍານວນອືສານ, (Khonkaen: Klangnanatham Company Ltd, 2549), Sec. IX. lines 23-45, pp. 82-83.

All listeners, brethren dear	father and mother reflect upon this
Consider deeply about charity	all generous deeds you have done
Did you gain mental benefits	I welcome you to introspect it from them
Have your meritorious acts made you happy	smile and happy always
Observe it see it	when you donate and distribute
Your mind becomes delightful	beget felicity through and through
Whenever you donate	it is a great benefit
Meritorious action is reckoned thus	welcome you to continue the effort
Accumulate merit gradually	little by little it will increase
When you die this shall be your asset	gain great merits
Everyone has to die	nobody can live forever
All beings in the vast world	none can escape from death
But when you transmigrate	to another realm
Everything would depend on your action	good and bad all depends on your action solely
Whoever has done good deeds	has goodness accumulated
When dead these actions will lead to heaven	ascend to heaven and reside there
Whoever has done evil deeds	these actions will let you
Fall into hell	full of suffering and lamentation
All virtuous people	men and women engage in generous action

Accumulate morality and generosity	the reward you gain is certain
Accrue good deeds there would be no suffering	the world will extol in your praise
Welcome you all do good	people will admire you
Deviate from all evil actions	it will reduce your value
Make you devoid of value in yourself	only good and evil exist in this world
All other animals	like herds of cattle
And herds	of elephants
All decay and decompose	but their skin tusks bones
Still have some value	can be sold and bought
When people die all's over	just cremate the body
Nothing remains	that could be sold or bought
Like the poetry that has taught	Thai poet has ever composed
I leave this to you all laity	for you to consider and reflect upon –
“Bull, oxen, buffalo, elephant	that are old and unworthy of any work
Their tusks, horns	still bear importance and value in body
But when humans die	the whole body is valueless
Only good and evil actions persist	to adorn the world.”
The entire human populace	when dead and decomposed
Goodness and evil still exist	permanent in essence
Offer this message to each of you	read and investigate this poetic truth <sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Phrakhru Sutasarapimol, *Phimpha Laeh Mahāchat 13 Kantha Isaan Version Sec. I.* lines 80-118, pp. 8-10.

## Spatialization

In the IsanMahachat narrative, spatiality plays an overriding role to temporality, since the narrative formula of opening the tale is more specific about place, leaving the exact time imprecise. This is quite obvious in the conventional opening of the Mahachat sermon, which opens up with the depiction of the scene of Phusati, the celestial consort of Indra and the would-be mother of the Bodhisattva, descending from her heavenly abode to the worldly realm of mortals upon receiving the ten divine blessings. Spatialization that makes for a freer handling of the time factor helps bring coherence to the narration of the entire story. Progress in the course of narration of events along a rigid straight line is not demanded because of a less rigid notion of time. The scene becomes more crucial in the unfolding of the plot than time. While the space factor gets added importance, the temporal dimension is often underplayed. The downgrading of the time factor is in keeping with the features of narratology like interiorization and cyclicalization.

## Fantazization

Fantazization is a privileged enterprise in the Isan Mahachat narrative. The plasticity of the imagination has encouraged the dominance of fantasy in the Isan narrative mould. Fantasy is a way of rendering even the unpleasant reality of the outside world in a colorful way with a touch of humor so that the listeners do not develop repugnance to the situation or the human agent embodying unpleasantness. This is obvious in the case of the glutton Chuchok whose character reveals obsession with greed and avarice and its accompanying miseries. The process of fantazization helps trigger the imagination of the listeners so that they can literally step into the story and enjoy it without any feeling of boredom or anxiety. Fantasy becomes an interface that the listener's imagination shares with that of the practitioner monk. The grammar of communication of the highlighted sections of the story is heavily weighted in favor of fancy and fantasy. All things impossible in the everyday rational world of so-called reality are made possible: for example rain-giving elephant, the intervention of supramundane power including celestial beings such as angels and deities.

Fantasization is given a free play in the actual narration of the vivid scenes that depict the nightmare that Masti experienced on the night before the day she lost her beloved children and her physical and mental fatigue when she tirelessly looked for her missing children. The practitioner monk-author invokes sensory details to draw the listeners' attention. The art of fantasization help listeners visualize what is being described and drawn them more deeply into a story:

Seven months ago	in the pavilion happily resided the queen
That night was the beginning	the ominous dream presaging
Sleepless and fidgeted	worried until fatigued
As the dawn crept in	so errie a dream she dreamt
What was it	she knew no way to solve it
Dreamt of a man	who brandished a sword strong and sharp
Wearing the red China rose	on his ears, his sinewy muscles all raised
So dreadfully terrific was it all	as if the sinful evil nearing
She begged for her life	but cared he not the least
Severed her two hands off instead	with blood splattering all over <sup>113</sup>
Feeble in body and hungry	as though got a cramp and swooned
She looked around the rows of trees	with a heart so weak and fragile
Walked to the deep	wide wild jungle
Stepped towards the fruits	the place where she ever sojourned
Erstwhile laden with ripen fruits	verdure and prolific

<sup>113</sup> Phrakhru Sutasarapimol, *Phimpha Laeh Mahāchat 13 Kantha Isaan Version Sec.VIII.* lines 6-16, p. 68.

All disappeared	gone was everything from there
Holding basket and spade	sought yet another tree
Hoping to secure	but turned utterly hopeless when she saw it
Nothing eatable	all decay and rotten
So pitiful a plight of Queen Masti	a broken heart and a pensive mood <sup>114</sup>

Great amount of satirical fantasization accompanies the scene that depicts Chuchok's gluttony when he relished his last meal:

... Have to feed old	the nasty old man
He is acting happily	with a belly protruding

He is looking back and turning around; he saw many things to eat then laughing happily. The naked old man hurries to take many pieces of fish into his mouth, then he takes a piece of bacon and then chicken into his mouth, he is really relishing and he continues to devour the fruits such as monkey apple, coconut and continues to drink up the soup from seven pots after that the dessert and then drinking water. When he finished he went to sleep on his bed but he could not move his belly and was at unease nearly dead, crying and moaning with suffering as if had been ill for years.<sup>115</sup>

## Stylization

Stylization represents the creativity of the practitioner monks in actual narrativization of the Mahachat sermon. The many different rhythms that have evolved over time represent stylistic features that are unique of the Isan Mahachat sermon. The most common style of rhythm used in the delivery of sung-sermon is “*Thamnong-nai-phuk-nai-mud*”, literally translated into English as “tying-wrapping rhythm”. It is the principal rhythm used by monks while chanting from manuscripts. It has the compositional characteristic of

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Sec. VIII. lines 57-66, p. 71.

<sup>115</sup> Phrakhru Sutasarapimol, *Phimpha Laeh Mahāchat 13 Kantha Isaan Version Sec.VIII.* lines 6-16, p.94

*Rai*, a traditional form of Isan verse. It is probable that this original rhythm has branched off with subtle variations at different localities throughout the northeastern region. Today, a practitioner monk may master any one of the following three styles or all three depending on the locale, individual choice, ability and training. i) *Thamnong Lomphad Phrao* a rhythm that resembles the drifting of coconut palm fronds in the breeze. It is a slow kind of rhythm requiring alternate strong and weak or mild voice modulation similar to the effect of wind on coconut palm fronds. This rhythm is typical of Ubon Racthathani province. ii) *Thamnong Chang Thiem Mae* a rhythm that resembles the movement of the elephant calf along the side of its mother. In this rhythm, the voice is alternately pressed and released but without complete release; sung at alternately high and low pitch but without producing the sound “eei-eei”. This rhythm is typical of Khonkaen and Chaiyaphum. iii) *Thamnong Kaa Taen Kona* rhythm that resembles the movement of a crow along lumps of clay. In this rhythm the voice is rendered as slow and fast alternately similar to a crow’s to and fro jumping, flying off, and landing movement around lumps of mud in the paddy field. This rhythm is typical of Roi-et province. Since it originated in Suwanaphum district, this rhythm is also known as Suwanaphum rhythm.<sup>116</sup>

## Improvisation

Improvisation is a liberating factor that plays a major role in the Mahachat sermon narration. In the process of improvisation, common everyday spoken words and phrases that are reinforcing because of their frequency of usage are brought into play with ease and flexibility to render immediacy and familiarity to the content. All narrations follow certain pre-established codes, raising certain kinds of expectations in the reader, spectator or listener, conditioning him to move on expected lines. The narrator cultivates the special skills required for satisfying those very expectations, otherwise he will be found wanting. There is extraordinary improvisation in the Masti section to arouse pathos in the listeners in regards to a dire situation as when a mother loses her beloved children. Through improvisation practitioner monks also highlight such other issues as gender

<sup>116</sup> For details about the different types of rhythm (in Thai) see Jaruwan Thammawat, *Characteristics of Isan Literature* (Mahasarakham: Srinakharinvirot University, 2521).

conflict, feminine emotionality, insecurity and subjugation – issues to which most female listeners can easily respond. Improvisation is thus used as another creative means supportive of content rendition that enables the monks to go beyond the limitations imposed by the code of stylization. It helps to provide elements of newness as well as contextualization. From our analysis we have found that improvisation is greatly manifested through the element of verbal irony.

Verbal irony is when the narrator or a character says the opposite of what he actually means. Verbal irony helps accent the true feeling for/against the situation. For example, Vessantara trusted and loved his wife Masti and so deliberately avoided disclosing the bitter truth of giving away the children as slaves to the greedy Brahmin. He feared that since she was already tired in the evening from the day's routine task of collecting fruits from the forest for her children, the sad news would mentally devastate her and so on her face he blamed and bitterly cursed her as being intentionally late in returning to the hermitage that evening. The readers/listeners are already informed in the course of narration of Matsi's plight in the forest – of how three ferocious animals obstructed her way and her struggle and longing to be back home to feed her hungry children. Through the use of verbal irony (as expressed in the acerbic words of the Bodhisattva) sung-sermon practitioner monks depict Matsi's pathetic situation in resemblance to the life of an ordinary woman faced with irrational and humiliating rebuff and spousal reprimand while trying to fulfill the role of a dutiful wife and mother. Since it is easy to react and respond to familiar situations, most female listeners can instantly internalize the suffering of Masti as a mother, a wife and a woman at the hands of patriarchy, confronting feminine subjugation and victimization within the institution of marriage. Consequently, there arises the feeling of great sympathy for her in the hearts of the listeners:

People say that women

have many an artfulness to lure  
and deceit

They do and

utter many wiles

If we know what they are up to

showers of praises be gotten

Today you did venture

to the forest

Sought no friend	to accompany
Who will agree with you	when you are in the forest?
You have forgotten your children	and involved in promiscuous acts
If I were the king	as before
I would have slit your throat	to cause you die
But now have come to build up	merits and practice meditation
So I do forgive you	it's the first time for you to deviate
Next time do not cry	do not pretend
You pretend to shed tears bringing forth saliva in your mouth	as doth the ancient word presaged
You refer to the kids	who else but you yourself do know
I know not about them	don't you ever ask me
You are shameless	full of pretention and wiles
That's the feminine desultory way	sinuous wiles at various levels
You related to many	least sincere with any
You have played a deceitful game	flirting and deceiving many
Don't tell a lie that you are ill	and ask for chicken soup
No pain no sickness	who can help you
If I seek you another spouse	anew
Your sickness will dissipate	you will ask for no medicine <sup>117</sup>

two features of stylization and improvisation are closely interlocked. Practitioner monkshavecloselyentwinedthetwinfeatures of stylization and improvisation. Stylization is discipline, but total stylization without any improvisation can be very stifling, unoriginal and most uncreative. Similarly, improvisation is freedom, but total

<sup>117</sup> Op. cit. Sec. IX. lines 57-79, pp. 82-83.

improvisation devoid of any solid foundation on stylization might be chaotic and unproductive. The sung-sermon practitioner monks seem to maintain an even balance between these two opposing pulls. Any stylized version of Vessantara Jataka presents the essential details of the entire story in all thirteen sections; whereas, the extensions of meanings and the interpolation of didactic messages are evidence of improvisation during actual rendition of the story as when delivered in the form of sung-sermon. Without the practitioner monks' wise application of the twin function of both stylization and improvisation, the story of Vessantara Jataka would have lost its original appeal and would never have been so widely known among lay devotees.

## Contextualization

The actual historical context of the Vessantara tale was ancient India. Practitioner monks through their creative narration of the story have merged this insurmountable spatial and temporal gap and thus have played an important role in contextualizing the entire tale within the context of the socio-religious cultural setup of Isan society. While narrating the story they continually contextualize it by drawing the listeners' attention to the element of interiorization. Besides interiorization, practitioner monks have rendered contextualization possible through elasticization of time within the narrative frame. As mentioned beforehand narrative time in sung-sermon is more psychological in character than logical or historical. Through focal selection, elaboration and condensation of particular sections of the entire story the temporal distance is tactfully merged between the event when it is believed to have actually occurred (in the penultimate life of the Buddha) and the present moment when the event is being internalized by the listeners while the story is being narrated by practitioner monks. In other words, through the use of figurative language composer monks collapse historical moments and suggest affinities between the fictional present and the historical past.

Thus it can be concluded that in order to delineate the story effectively, sung-sermon monks have devised many different techniques of narratology that have positively affected

the proliferation, preservation and continuation of the tradition of this oral narrative form. These techniques have also helped to infuse great enjoyment, merry-making, spiritualism, subliminal bliss and solace to the process of listening to the sermon. It is almost obligatory for monks who take up the task of delivering the sung-sermon to prepare themselves very well about such things like – when and how to modulate their voice, when to interject new but relevant ideas, and how to make the session interesting with an occasional touch of humor to sustain the listeners' attention. The delivery of the sermon is based on a listener-centered approach and so careful attention is paid to the listeners. As for instance, if a majority of the listeners are women, the monks would prefer to improvise and prolong the part of the story dealing with the female protagonist, Matsu to bring forth the ideals of feminine self-sacrifice, wifely obligation, motherly caring and concern. As a whole, this rhythmic sermon is a great form of oral narration that demands not just mechanical skill – a naturally good voice – but also creativity, spontaneity, psychological prowess, imagination, improvisation skills, rigorous practice and last but not the least, mindfulness so as not to deviate from the path of proper use of rhythm and abstinence from over-indulgence in voice modulation technique. It can be concluded that the application of all the narratological categories outlined here have a cumulative effect on the successful delivery of the sermon.

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