



# The Educational need to Preserve Buddhist Cultural Identity in An Inter-Connected World

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## Abstract

Mindful preservation of age-old Buddhist cultural manifestations is an ethical duty, especially so in our present era when rapid cultural displacement and disruption have become the norm under the ongoing onslaught of capitalism and consumerist modes of practice. The unmindful sabotaging and annihilation of indigenous cultural patterns have become widely prevalent. To counter this detrimental trend it is essential to go back to the roots of different Buddhist cultural manifestations and preserve them in the original form for the ethico-religious educational training of the younger generation. Buddhist cultural identity is a very broad term and under its rubric we will discuss a distinct tradition from Northeast Thailand (Isan), which clearly depicts the adaptation and assimilation of a Buddhist Jataka story with local modes of expression and ideas. While adaptation and assimilation give rise to harmonious blending of differences, preservation of distinctiveness leads to a tolerant acceptance of the proliferation of the differences within and outside of one's own community or region. These are like two different flows of currents, but each can actually complement the other and in this regard helps actualize the reinforcement of the threefold training of *sīla, samādhi* and *paññā* through cultural preservation. If we take the case of Northeast Thailand, we can see the richness of the Buddhist cultural heritage of the region still being reflected through the very unique twelve-month tradition, collectively named as *Prapheni Heet Sibsong*, and of which the Mahachat Sung-sermon forms a major performative ceremonial event. But like the rest of the country, Isan too is rapidly changing due to various factors operative in the modernization process and we can witness a persistent eroding of ethico-cultural values and doxastic foundation among the younger generation. If the process of cultural erosion

continues unabated, the younger generation would become completely ‘illiterate’ and hence indifferent to the richness of the indigenous Buddhist culture that was once shaped by their ancestors. Hence the need arises to give rise to *samma vayama* in preservation of the pristine culture vis-à-vis the cosmopolitan forces that go against such preservation. The religion of urbanization is not Buddhism, but materialism, and to sustain this new *weltanschauung*, Buddhism gets either appropriated for material/worldly gains, or relegated and replaced by a more secular and non-religious identity and mind-set for sheer ideological purpose, both equally detrimental for Buddhists in the long run. Hence there is an exigent need for an alternative interventionist stance to dismantle the two polarized positions – one of appropriation for worldly consumerist gains, and the other of complete annihilation under the guise of the ideology of secularism. Accepting the truth of the ethical role of such a stance, this paper highlights the significance of preservation of Buddhist cultural identity in an inter-connected world from within the context of Northeast Thailand.

*Keywords:* Buddhist cultural identity, Prapheni Heet Sibsong, Mahachat Sung-sermon  
alternative interventionist stance, polarized position

## Introduction

We are all born into socio-linguistic and religious culture of one type or the other, and therefore, it is not possible to bypass cultural experience. While egoistic clinging to one's own cultural roots to the extent of upholding them as 'the best' or better than other forms of manifestation is a spirituo-cognitive dissonance, nevertheless it is worthy to understand one's culture deeply and objectively so that it helps us to be receptive of others' in the long run while preserving with full integrity our own distinctive cultural identity. Failure to be mindfully aware of one's own cultural characteristics impedes a deeper experience of interconnection and relatedness. Therefore, the educational need to preserve one's cultural identity in an inter-connected world is not only exigent but at a deeper level stands as an ethical obligation that should not be overlooked under any socio-political and philosophico-ideological circumstance. The Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is a core teaching in Buddhism and the whole issue of cultural preservation can be looked at from the perspective of co-arising of cause and effect, which is critically important to experiencing that which is beyond the individual ego/self as well as the collective ego shaped by the collective unconsciousness.

## Buddha's initiation of the Dhammic culture opened the door for linguistic freedom

When the number of disciples who attained *arahantship* gradually increased, the Buddha decided to send them to different directions to teach the laity, thus leading to decentralized propagation of *dhammic* knowledge. Dispatching his first sixty disciples to wander among the villages and towns teaching the timeless truths he had discovered through his own extremely dedicated practice, he said: 'Bhikkhus, you should all wander about for the benefit and happiness of the majority, help the people of this world, support and provide well-being to all deities and human beings.'<sup>1</sup>

At the time of the Buddha, Sanskrit was the language of religious undertakings. Scriptural memorization and all ritualistic performances were conducted in this classical language which was monopolized solely by the priestly Brahmin caste of ancient India. Along with the Buddha's emphasis on a casteless and classless society, came the de-emphasizing

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<sup>1</sup>Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 42.

of Sanskrit as the only religious medium of propagation. So Buddhist monastics were encouraged to propagate Buddhism in the commoners' tongue. Likewise, the door of the monastic Order remained open to people from every stratum of society. This democratic gesture was given its final validation with the entry of women as ordained monastic leaders – *samaneris* and *bhikkhunis*.

In the *Vinayapitaka*, one of the primary scriptures of the Buddha's Teachings, there is a story that relates directly to the Buddha's open-mindedness towards linguistic culture and pluralistic approach to language:

Two monastics disciples of the Buddha called Yamelu and Tekula, who belonged to the brahmin caste, and who were gifted with great voice and the art and skill of delivery of dhamma talks, once asked the Blessed One: "Lord, now the monastics are of various names, of various races, variously born, having gone forth from various clans. They spoil the word of the Blessed One by using their own language. Let us render the words of the Buddha into classical metre."

Upon hearing this, the Blessed One, rebuked them: "Misguided men, how can you say 'Let us render the words of the Buddha into classical metre?' This will not rouse faith in the faithless or increase faith in the faithful; rather it will keep the faithless without faith and harm some of the faithful." Having rebuked them, he addressed the monastics thus: "Monastics, the word of the Buddha is not to be rendered into classical metre. Whoever does so commits an offence of wrongdoing. I allow the words of the Buddha to be learnt in one's own language.<sup>2</sup>

By not allowing the Brahmin disciples to codify the teachings into a single cultural experience the Buddha deconstructed the prevalent pattern of thought related to the linguistic dominance of one single language and one form of expression from the dominant Brahmanical culture and preached for linguistic pluralism for the good of many. By opposing the parochial notion of the possibility of his teachings being 'corrupted' by the medium of expression, the Buddha was the first to uphold the significance of the vernacular languages. Today, linguists argue for teaching the child in his or her mother tongue instead of a state language that might not be the child's first language. In this sense, the Buddha's inclusive ideas were extremely advanced for his time and worthy even in our modern-day context.

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<sup>2</sup>Horner, I.B., *The Book of Discipline*.

The Buddha lived in a historical era when communication was done solely through oral transmission of language. Language was equivalent of culture and was in fact a determinant of culture in the sense that if one departed from the region of one's own specific linguistic background and entered a region of another language one effectively entered a different culture. The ability for oral language to cross cultural borders was extremely difficult. The underlying message of the Buddha's words above is that it is misguided to offer the teachings in only one cultural/linguistic form, and that he permitted the teachings to be offered within the context of one's own socio-linguistic culture. In our present day context, this idea can be seen so beautifully manifested in the diverse forms of rendition of the Vessantara Jataka in different regions of Thailand.

### **The Mahachat Sung-sermon (Thet Laeh) - An indigenous dhammic cultural expression**

In Northeast Thailand, or Isan, Buddhist ethico-religious and cultural heritage has to a great extent remained intact to the present day. Based on Buddhist principles, the twelve-month traditions that are collectively called Prapheni Heet Sibsong<sup>3</sup> mark the entire lunar calendar and has since time immemorial formed the warp and woof of the traditional Thai-Isan way of life. Each of the traditional ceremonies is an occasion for merit-making, observance of the precepts, cultivation of morality (*sīla*), meditation (*saṃādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) and points towards a gradual progress along the ethico-spiritual path. Although Isan is generally regarded as the most 'underdeveloped' region in the country, in every sense of the term, a close look at how the Isan people have entwined their lives with the twelve-month tradition reveals the richness of the Buddhist ethico-religious and cultural heritage. Starting from the month of Ai, the first month in the Isan lunar calendar, that approximately starts in December, the ceremonies are – Boonkhaokam, Boonkhaojee, Boonkhunlarn or Boonkumkhaoyai, Boonphravet, Boonsongkran, Boonbangfai, Boonchamha, Boonkhaophansa, Boonkhaopradapdin, Boonkhaosak, Boonokphansa and Boonkathin. There are three pervading aspectual elements deeply ingrained in the conceptual framework of Prapheni Heet Sibsong – self-purification, the practice of generosity (*dana*) and concern for the well-being of others.

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<sup>3</sup>For a religio-philosophical understanding of *Prapheni Heet Sibsong* see Visuddhangkoon, "Prapheni Heet Sibsong: The Tradition of Merit Making with Ethical Commitment to the 'Other,'" 194-208.

Moreover, each of these ancient traditional ceremonies focuses upon the creation of social harmony and recognition of mutual co-existence among all people in the community. For instance, in Boonkumkhaoyai, villagers co-operate to form the giant paddy heap by donating newly harvested unhusked rice for the purpose of supporting and promoting various projects related to the lay community's welfare, monastic education and propagation of Buddhism. Viewed from the socio-ethical perspective, Prapheni Heet Sibsong as a whole epitomizes the culture of merit-making ingrained in the traditional Thai-Isan way of life.

The Boon Phavet ceremony that marks the fourth lunar month and falls approximately in the month of March is the most important ceremony in the entire corpus of the twelve-month Isan traditions. The unique feature of this traditional ceremony is that specialized and trained monks are invited to different temples for chanting the *Vessantara Jātaka* (Thai, Isan: *Vessantdorn Chadok*) – the story of *Mahachat* or The Great Birth.<sup>4</sup> Of the 550 Buddhist stories (*Jātakas*) illustrating the previous lives of the Buddha, the *Vessantara Jātaka* is the most popular in Thailand and has long since been delineated in both poetry and pictorial arts. The Great Birth story relates the penultimate birth of the Buddha as Prince Vessantara, the Bodhisattva, and depicts the perfection of the virtue of charity (*dāna*).

In Northeast Thailand, monks who have a voice with range and depth train themselves to recite this story in a rhythmic style that is quite unique when compared to ordinary chanting. This rhythmic chanting, called *Thet Laeh* or sung-sermon is an oral narrative practice that has long served as a great tool for the teaching and propagation of core Buddhist principles among lay followers. The most unique characteristic feature of sung-sermon as a form of oral narrative and a mode of teaching the dhamma is that it is rendered in the local Isan dialect, making dhamma readily accessible and enjoyable to lay devotees.

There are two styles of Buddhist dhamma preaching and narration – *dhamma pamānika* and *dhamma ghosappamānika*. *Dhamma pamānika* is the ordinary chanting of Buddhist monks in which words follow the *roi kaew* or prosaic pattern; whereas, in *ghosappamānika* both high and low pitch and short and long modulation in the pattern of *roi krong* or poetic style is deployed.<sup>5</sup> The particular technique used in *ghosappamānika* renders the study of dhamma easy, especially when it comes to memorization and clear comprehension. Moreover, when the sermon is delivered in *roi krong*, listeners derive pleasure

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<sup>4</sup>For a detailed analysis of the Mahachat Sung-sermon see Mahanta (Visuddhangkoon), *A Critical Study of the Mahachat Sung-sermon (Thet Laeh) from Isan*.

<sup>5</sup>Phithipong, “Wannakam Laeh Jak Amphur Phanthong Changwat Chonburi,” 54.

and tend to understand dhamma without any boredom. Out of the two types of chanting it is observed that people listen to the second type more. The number of listeners of the second type outnumbers the first type, especially when it is the sung-sermon that includes the Thet Mahachat. Lay Buddhists believe that if one who can listen through the complete 13 *kanth* or sections of the Thet Mahachat on a single day can attain great *ānisong* (great benefit i.e., merit).

From a study that we conducted, it is clear that the Mahachat sermon (the Vessantara Jataka), which is well-known throughout Thailand, was originally delivered in prosaic form in the Pāli language, which later came to be replaced by Thai, and subsequently into Isan lyric form that began to flourish in the sung-sermon style (Thet Laeh Mahachat) perhaps more than half a century ago. The thematic content of Mahachat sermon has never changed, but the way it is delivered has undergone modifications in Northeast Thailand from time to time. From a single monk prosaic recitation style it changed into many monks' recitation of each of the thirteen sections. With the passage of time, this style appeared to be longish and in order to make it appealing and enjoyable to listeners, recitation of Thet Mahachat is later adapted to *Hok Thammaat* or *Chaw Kasat* having six practitioner monks, each taking the role of six main characters from the story – King Sonjay, Queen Phusadee, Prince Vessantdorn, Princess Matsu, and the royal grandchildren, Prince Chali and Princess Kanha. Role of other minor characters are shared or exchanged by the members of the practitioner monks' team. In the present scenario, three practitioner monks can take up all the roles and successfully deliver the sermon on a single day in the sung-sermon style that is highly interesting and appealing to the Isan people.

Since Northeast Thailand is quite a large region comprising of twenty provinces, it is observed that the Mahachat sung-sermon has evolved in many varied forms in different localities. While the language of narration is invariably the same, actual rendition varies from place to place depending on the originator/s and the influence of indigenous musical styles and traditions. According to Phra Ariyanuwat Khemacari, there are many different kinds of rhythmic style of the sung-sermon in Isan.<sup>6</sup> It is at times difficult to assure which rhythmic style is accurate and consistent with the ancient traditional styles. This is because changes in the rhythmic style have taken place over the time following local needs, values and aesthetic sensibilities. The differences are noticeable in the modulation of rhythm in

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<sup>6</sup>Khemachari, *Rabiyab Boran Prapheni Thamboon Mahachat Phak Isan*, 32-48.

different styles as when the voice is rendered expressively sorrowful, mellowed, soft and strong to correspond with the sung-sermon content. Due to creative infusion of rhythm and evolving characteristic marking the delivering of the story of Vessantdorn, the Mahachat sermon came to be known as *kanthet thamnong* (rhythmic chanting) or *kanthet siang* (sung-sermon). In *kanthet siang* (sung-sermon) the practitioner monk has to use good skill and voice modulation techniques such as controlling the breath, rendering the voice soft, loud, slow, fast or vibrate. The rhythmic styles that are predominantly used are local or indigenous such as *lom-phad-phraow*, *chang-thiam-mae*, *kaah-ten-kon*.<sup>7</sup>

In order to delineate the story effectively, sung-sermon practitioner monks have devised many different literary, stylistic and narratological techniques 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. Stylisation represents the creativity of the practitioner monks in actual narrativization of the Mahachat Sung-sermon. The many different rhythms that have evolved over time represent stylistic features that are unique of the Isan Mahachat Sung-sermon. The most common style of rhythm used 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 *Rai*, a traditional form of Isan verse. It is probable that this original rhythm had 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 Lom-phad-phrao* is 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 Ubonrachathani province. ii) *Thamnong Chang-thiem-mae* is 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 Kaah-ten-kon* is a 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

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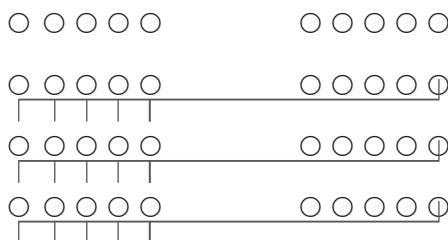
<sup>7</sup>Dhammadwat, *Laksana Wannakam Isan*, 8-9.

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.

When practitioner monks compose the Mahachat sung-sermon text in the *roi krong* or lyrical version they use the *Rai Yao* composition predominantly. There is great use of both internal and external rhymes with selective use of alliteration and assonance. According to Sila Viravong the *Rai Yao* composition of the Isan type has the following pattern.

1. The number of verse has no limit. The number of words in each verse varies from 5 to maximum 14.

2. The last word of each verse rhymes with any word in the following verse and follows this pattern until the end.



In the Vessantara Jātaka of the Isan version composed by Ven. Phimpha this type of rhyme predominates almost the entire text with little variations.

## ๖ กัณฑ์จุลพน ๓๕ พระคากา

โปรดสตั๊บรับข้อ	ธรรมภาคกระແສເສີຍ
เป็นສໍາເນື່ອງສໍາວນ	ກາຄືສັນເສີຍແຫ່ລ
ชาດກແປລປະເພີນ	ໂດຍພິມພາຜູ້ເອກ
ສຣເສກັດເລືອກເທິນ	ເອມາເລັນເວ່ຍເສີຍ
ບັດນີ້ພຶກຕ່ອນເນື່ອງ	ມහາຈັດກັນທີ່ທິກ
ຈຸລັພນສີຍອຍກ	ເທສນາຈາຊ້ອນ
ກລ່າວົງຕອນພຣາມນົ່າ	ພນາເຂາດັນປ່າ <sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Phrakhru Sutasarapimol, *Phimpha Laeh Mahachat 13 Kantha Isaan Version* ພິມພາ ແຫລ່ມຫາຫາຕີ ๑๓ ກັນທີ່ສໍາວນອີສັນ, Sec. VI. lines 1-7, p. 50.

## 6 Julaphon Section 35 verses

Listen attentively	to the <b>applied-sermon</b>
In the accent and <b>idiom</b>	of Isan <b>sung-sermon</b>
Jataka in translation and new <b>composition</b>	by Phimpha the expert in <b>versification</b>
Selective <b>interpolation</b>	brought forth for <b>sermonizing</b>
Now listen in <b>sequencing</b>	the sixth section of Mahachat <b>sermon</b>
I uphold the <b>Julaphon</b>	<b>sermon</b>

Shall narrate till the **beginning** when in the forest the Bodhisat is **entering**<sup>9</sup>

The pattern of *Rai* composition is maintained all throughout the text even when parts of certain sections are presented in prosaic form to indicate discourses which are recited in a simple reading style without the fusion of any rhythm or sung-sermon (*laeh*) style as found in the *Chaksat* section when Vessantdorn is welcomed to the Cheung City known as “*Laeh Chaksat Ban Chern*” and in *Lakhon* section when Phusadee offers apparel to Masti to be worn known as “*Laeh Nakhon Taem Ta Fa*.”

From our analysis of figurative use of language in the sermon text, we have found that various 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 each of the thirteen sections of the text. The use of figures of speech has rendered great vitality to the story and has positively affected the proliferation, preservation and continuation of the tradition of the Mahachat sung-sermon as a whole in Isan.

Regarding narratology in the Isan Mahachat sung-sermon, it has been observed that various devices are employed such as interiorization, serialization, fantasisation, cyclicalisation, elasticisation of time, spatialisation, stylization and improvisation. The nine categories can be grouped into three classes – formal method, content rendition and creative infusion. Interiorization, cyclicalization and serialization fall under the rubric of

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<sup>9</sup> Although a monosyllabic language, the acoustic tonal beauty of Isan is aesthetically well expressed during an actual rhythmic recital session of the Mahachat sermon by any expert sung-sermon practitioner monk. I regret my inability to capture the beauty of the language in my translation. It will require years of dedicated effort, and I have miles and miles to go.

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.<sup>10</sup>

Rhythm and words are bound together in the Isan Mahachat sung-sermon, and the meticulously arranged sermon wordings that are soothing to the ears are conducive to the development of *bhavana* or a meditative state in the listeners. Alliterative words and phrases abound in the text and receive reinforcement because of their phonological structure. Since the Isan language is tonal, word selection is based on particular sequences of tone that enhance the rhythmic scheme. At one level the thematic structure guides the sung-sermon practitioner monks by providing the fixed format of thirteen sections of the Mahachat Jātaka within which they can create and improvise without altering the basic story. At another level the poetic structures such as the rhyme schemes and diction used do the same. It is the interaction of these two levels of structure which give the monks the freedom to create.

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 humour to sustain the listeners' interest and attention. The delivery of the sermon is based on an audience-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 to abstain from over-indulgence in voice modulation technique.<sup>11</sup> It can be concluded that the application of

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<sup>10</sup> For details on narratology in the Isan Mahachat Sung-Sermon see Visuddhangkoon, "The Isan Mahachat Sung-sermon (*Thet Laeh*): Some reflections on its Narratological aspects," 29-43.

<sup>11</sup> During my interview sessions most monks have informed me about regular practice either individually or with co-practitioner monks before public performance.

all the stylistic and literary elements and various narratological categories have a cumulative effect on the successful delivery of the sermon.

## **The rationale for awakening renewed interest in the Isan Mahachat Sung-sermon**

The Mahachat sung-sermon text is extremely rich in both religious and linguistic information. Its religious significance is clear from the fact that it provides the foundational base of moral perfection, epitomized in the character of the Bodhisattva. The text provides innumerable examples of proverbs and didactic messages that listeners can reflect upon and bring into practice in daily life in order to accumulate merit and enrich their lives in spiritual terms. In order that all Buddhists have a chance to internalize the real value of perfecting generosity through a direct access to the sermon, the crucial role that Mahachat sung-sermon practitioner monks play in preserving this oral narrative tradition should be recognized.<sup>12</sup> Without the practitioner monks' concerted effort this oral narrative will not survive. Likewise, parents, teachers, elders ought to inculcate an interest in the younger generation to listen to the sermon with attention and mindfulness so that they would not bypass it as a mere part of their local culture. The fact that there are great lessons embedded in the sermon text has to be emphasized and reiterated time and again. This is because from various interactive sessions that the author had have with teenagers and adolescents, she discovered that they are least interested in the sermon. Not only does the younger generation fail to recognize the richness of this particular aspect of Isan Buddhist tradition as a result of strong influence of central Thai culture, a huge chunk of the urban and rural ethnic Isan teenage population is totally illiterate in comprehension of the sermon text which is preserved in their own native language i.e., Isan. Therefore, it is advisable that one interprets the Mahachat sung-sermon text both from the religious as well as secular perspective. The secular approach will help us understand and appreciate the richness of the text in linguistic and cultural terms. To the youngsters, who are not so religiously-oriented these days, the secular approach can help inculcate a sense of interest in the sermon text *vis-a-vis* the indigenous Isan literary heritage. Such an approach can eventually lead to the cultivation of pride and analytical

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<sup>12</sup> During my interview sessions monks have informed me that there is no governmental support in recognition of their preservation of the Mahachat sung-sermon as an oral narrative. Their main source of inspirational and financial support comes from the lay devotees who formally invite them to the annual Boon Phavet ceremony.

understanding in the younger generation of the uniqueness of Isan's socio-cultural identity against the backdrop of its literary heritage and linguistically rich cultural origins.

The Isan Mahachat sung-sermon text provides very good examples of the poetic usage of the Isan language. The text can be used as an example for analysis in a Thai, Isan, Lao or English literature class to instill interests in students in interpreting 'religious' literature from a secular perspective so as to understand the role of such literature in the context of indigenous folk culture and tradition. The Mahachat sermon is an integral part of Thai-Isan Buddhist oral narrative tradition. And a literary interpretation will definitely enhance our understanding of this crucial point. Linguistic analysis of different versions of the Isan Mahachat sung-sermon can further enrich our understanding of Isan as an evolving language, both in its archaic beauty and contemporary usage. Moreover, translation of different versions of the Isan Mahachat sung-sermon texts can help proliferate the richness of Isan literary tradition alongside the propagation of core Buddhist values such as compassion, generosity, self-sacrifice, selflessness, endurance etc., that are embedded in the text.

In our analysis of literary and narratological aspects we have used the text "Phimpha Laeh Mahachat 13 Kantha (Isan version)" พิมพา แหลมมหาชาติ ๑๓ กัณฑ์ (สำนวนอีสาน). Since the Mahachat sermon has been composed by many monks, both in prose and poetry, further studies can focus on comparative analysis of different versions of the Mahachat sung-sermon texts in Isan, or on analytical comparison between Isan, central Thai and Lanna versions.

In the course of our research documentation of actual Mahachat sung-sermon sessions, we have observed that the rendition of the story varies in style and rhythm among practitioner monks in Northeast Thailand, as for instance, Khonkaen and Roi-et practitioner monks use the Isan dialect predominantly and the indigenous rhythms such as *Lom-phad-phraow*, *Chang-thiam-mae*, *Kaah-ten-kon*; whereas, practitioner monks from Surin and Sisaket infuse Khmer words and rhythmic style in the narration of the story. Comparative study can thus be made of linguistic and stylistic approaches of central Isan and southern Isan practitioner monks. The richness in the narration of the Mahachat sermon can be brought out by comparative studies of texts composed by monks from both sides of the Mekong as well. In order to analyze the similarities and differences in rendition, broad scale studies can also be done of the greater Mekong region comprising the Isan, Lao and Khmer Mahachat sung-sermon versions so that the literary and linguistic uniqueness of each tradition can be highlighted from a comparative perspective.

## Concluding remarks

The Mahachat sung-sermon text can be regarded as a literary text of great artistic merit through which the composer-monk's expertise in handling various literary elements – style of versification, choice of diction and stylistic devices – get manifested. The core essence of the Mahachat sermon lies in revealing the selfless character of the bodhisattva, who is the epitome of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice. This sermon is used 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 – loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, charity, self-sacrifice, honesty, moral courage and determination – into real life situation and practice. In order to delineate the story well and render the narration effective, practitioner monks have played a major role in devising different techniques.

The Mahachat sung-sermon practitioner monks have successfully come to play eight major roles namely, propagation of Buddhism, preservation of indigenous Buddhist oral narrative, drawing peoples' attention to indigenous Buddhist culture and tradition, contributing creatively towards the preservation of the Isan language, contextualizing the Jātaka story in the Isan socio-cultural context, uniting village community for merit-making during the Boon Phavet ceremony on the occasion of which the sermon is actually delivered, instilling pride among local people in perfection of generosity and diversifying creative monastic roles.

It can be observed that Mahachat sung-sermon practitioner monks, who are shaping a humble career as sung-sermon practitioner monks, are certainly not violating monastic rules, as have some puritanically-minded people might think or judge from a very parochial perspective. The Isan Mahachat sung-sermon has to be understood in the broader context of applicability of diverse tools and techniques for dhamma propagation at a grassroot level with focus on infusion and mindful assimilation of indigenous cultural elements. Although the present writer does not hesitate to use the word 'sung', it has to be understood that this particular sermon is not pure singing and is least comparable to some other religions' musical rendition of psalms and devotional songs, such as the Hindu Bhajans, Sikh Kirtans, etc. Besides, there is no musical accompaniment to sung-sermon. But the reason why we call it sung is to emphasize its difference from other forms of general sermon which are delivered in a plain style. It has to be acknowledged that in the Mahachat Sung-sermon a minimal voice modulation and a harmonious rendition of high and low pitch is maintained in order to correspond to certain elements in the Vessantara Jātaka story such as – pathos, humor, sarcasm, irony, etc. To a puritan, if monks using rhythm in sermon delivery is still

a violation of monastic disciplinary code, then it would be rather wise to draw our attention to the point that the Buddha once hearing the sound of a lute realized that a lute's string should not be too tight or too loose, but just right – and this led him to strive towards enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, if a sung-sermon practitioner monk's mindful use of rhythm awakens the minds of lay devotees and fills their hearts with subliminal joy and motivation for compassionate actions in daily life, the purpose of the sermon can be said to have very well fulfilled.

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<sup>13</sup> When asked during the course of our interviews whether they have ever felt any qualms regarding the use of rhythm in the Mahachat Sung-sermon, all practitioner monks have invariably replied in the negative. They emphasized the point that their main purpose is to propagate Buddhist values through the sermon and that the use of rhythm helps the listener to listen to the entire sermon without any boredom. They have also expressed happiness in their ability to preserve a major part of the Isan culture.

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