

# **Disseminating and Bringing to Life Traditional Thai/Lao Folk Literature among the Younger Generation**

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## **Introduction**

Traditional Thai/Lao folk literature may be little known to the new generation for two major reasons: first they are recorded on palm-leaf manuscripts in old scripts; second, they are not used in people's real lives. This paper attempts to introduce ways to disseminate folk literature to the younger generations. The preservation of palm-leaf manuscripts is a noble project for scholars to be able to locate these manuscripts and to study them. However, I feel that these efforts are still not widely recognized by the younger generation. To disseminate Thai/Lao traditional literature to young people, a few suggestions are worth consideration: to publish tales from palm-leaf manuscripts in modern scripts; to adapt and polish the tales and put them in attractive picturebook forms and in interactive CD ROM; to use traditional literature in teaching English or research on teaching methodology; and to bring the tales to life by using story-theater style of telling stories.

This paper first discusses the background of how the writer came to establish the Mahasarakham University Storytelling Project and to work on the preservation and dissemination of Thai/Lao folk literature, and then discusses each of the above suggestions on how to disseminate traditional literature among younger people with the emphasis on how to bring traditional tales to life. Some folktales adapted for story-theater style performances are also provided as examples.

## **The Mahasarakham University Storytelling Project**

I am an English teacher, teaching English and American Literature at the Western Languages and Linguistics Department at Mahasarakham University. My involvement in Thai/Lao traditional literature began during my Ph.D. studies at Drew University in New Jersey, USA,

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<sup>1</sup> Assisted by Phanida Phunkrathok and Prasong Saihong.

where I discovered the greatness of Thai/Lao folk epics<sup>2</sup> and translated the 1,700 lines of the folk epic *Phadaeng Nang Ai* into English verse for my Ph.D. dissertation, which was published by Bucknell University Press in 1990. Five years later I received a Fulbright grant to translate three more Isan folk epics into English verse. *Phya Khankhaak* was published by the same press in 1996, and the translations of *Kaew Na Ma* and *Kamphra Phinoi* are still to be published.

When I returned to Thailand after the translation project was done, I found that children did not like to speak local Isan dialects, and I was quite concerned that local dialects would be lost together with any cultural heritage, be it literature, folk wisdom, or traditions. A mini-survey of children's knowledge and attitudes towards an Isan dialect and folk literature conducted in 1993 revealed that more than 50 percent of the children interviewed could not speak any local dialect and did not wish to learn to speak. When asked to name Isan folktales, they cited *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, or *The Three Little Pigs*. The only piece of folk literature that they could name accurately was *Nang Sipsong (The Twelve Sisters)*, and that was because one of the Thai TV channels was broadcasting the story at the time.

Seeing the results of the survey, I became very concerned and wrote a proposal to work on the preservation of local dialects and folk literature by using storytelling as a means. Out of many organizations contacted, only very few gave a little support, such as the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Mobile Oil Company, and the James Thompson Foundation. In 1995, the Fulbright Foundation sent Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald to help train the university students to collect and adapt folktales for performances, and to tell stories in story-theater style. After the first year of the project, John F. Kennedy Foundation of Thailand gave a grant to train students to tell stories in English and to take some of them to tell stories in the United States.

The activities of the storytelling project involved training about 20 university students to collect folktales, to adapt them for telling and to tell stories in story-theater styles. Then the university students were taken two times to visit all provincial schools in 19 provinces of the Isan. The first time was to do a survey of the children in all 19 provinces of the Isan on their knowledge and attitude towards local dialects and folk literature, and to tell stories using the folktales and dialects of each of the provinces. Workshops for teachers were conducted at the schools, where they were trained to encourage the children to collect stories from their elders and to tell stories. On the second visit, the same survey was conducted again. This time the children told their stories and we listened to them. On these school

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<sup>2</sup> วุฒิปา ทศตะ ภาแดงนางไอ่ ซื่อคิดบางประการจากงานแปล รัชมังกลาภิเษก : อีสานศึกษา อภิชชาติการพิมพ์  
มหาสารคาม 2531, หน้า 109-120.

visits, mostly university students would go with us to tell the stories, and I was the facilitator of the project, making arrangements and taking the students to the schools for the survey and the performances. But at the mid-term or final examination times, the students could not go and so I had to tell the stories myself.

Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald helped to arrange for myself and some of the outstanding students to go to tell stories abroad. Then the John F. Kennedy Foundation of Thailand, with the help of Mr. Patrick Hodai from USIS, provided funding to take students to tell stories in the Pacific Northwest of the USA. Four students went on that trip and Dr. MacDonald hosted us. After that we went to tell more Thai/Lao stories in the USA, Australia, the Netherlands, Singapore, and of course, Vientiane. For going to tell stories abroad, I had to build up the collections of stories in English for our repertoire. Besides teaching, when we heard of any community with storytellers, we would go and visit them when we had the chance and interview them for more stories, and when we heard that a temple had palm-leaf manuscripts, we would go to visit the temple. After collecting the stories, we adapted them to be suitable for public performances, and then translated them in to English. So we now have many Thai/Lao stories in English now.

As an English teacher in a university, I use these stories in my teaching. Every semester I also offer two courses where I can use the folktales and storytelling: *Independent Study in Literature* and *Children's Literature*. In the Independent Study course, I narrow the content of the course to *Folktales and Storytelling*. For the Children's Literature course, I use storytelling as a major part of the syllabus. Traditional literature is used every semester and at least ten students learn this genre of literature. In a small way, this helped preserve and disseminate some of the traditional literature since the onset of the storytelling project in 1995. The project itself was successful but it ended in 1998, when we stopped visiting schools due to lack of funding, and only went out on request or invitation.

### **The Preservation of Palm-leaf Manuscripts**

As mentioned earlier, one of my duties in teaching storytelling and children's literature is to find more stories, including those from the palm-leaf texts. However, the problem is that I can read only the old Lao script or *Thai noi* as Thai scholars call it, whereas many of the folktales are recorded in *Tham* script.

### **Phra Ariyanuwat and the Preservation of Traditional Literature**

During his lifetime, Phra Ariyanuwat<sup>3</sup> transliterated some folktales into modern Thai script, and it was because of his work that I could translate two of the folk epics into English verse:

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<sup>3</sup> Phra Ariyanuwat was given a royal cremation in 1992.

*Phadaeng Nang Ai*<sup>4</sup> and *Phya Khankhaak*<sup>5</sup>. As mentioned, the preservation of palm-leaf manuscripts is a noble project for scholars to be able to locate these manuscripts and to study them. But that is not enough because only a handful of scholars can read them. There should be more projects like that of Phra Ariyanuwat's. Actually, in Laos, before 1975, there were many published versions of folk literature in modern Lao script. When I was at the University of Hawaii, I found quite a few of them in the Indo-Pacific Department. In Thailand, after Phra Ariyanuwat's time, the Rajabhat Institute in Mahasarakham published a few more works of folk literature transliterated from palm-leaf texts. But with limitations in budget and employees, the project has come to a stop in the last few years.

### **Phra Inta Kawewong and the Khlang Nanatham Printing Company**

Phra Inta Kawewong is the abbot of Wat Sa-ahd-sombun in Roi-Et province in Thailand. When he was young, he worked as a type-setter at the Khlang Nanatham Printing Company in Khonkaen. He wrote many *lam* verses for traditional folk singers to sing or to perform *lam phuen* (folk singing of stories) and *lam muu* (group performances of folk epics similar to folk operas). Phra Inta Kawewong is an outstanding poet of Thai/Lao traditional poetry, and he can read and write old scripts such as old Lao and *tham*. After reading folktales or old verses in the palm-leaf manuscripts, he retells traditional folktales in more simple language that is easier for people to understand, and Khlang Nanatham has published all of his works. Nowadays, under the management of the new owner, Khun Phaiboon Hanpanit, the printing company continues to play an important role in the preservation and dissemination of folk literature through publishing and republishing many folktales and other materials relating to Thai/Lao culture and customs. Khun Phaiboon searches for palm-leaf manuscripts which he asks Phra Inta Kawewong to read and to re-write the folktales in easier reading poetic form using modern Thai script. Phra Inta Kawewong, now 79 years old, has thus been a major force in the preservation and dissemination of Thai/Lao folk literature that is one step removed from the palm-leaf manuscripts.

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<sup>4</sup> พระอารียานุวัตรเหมจารี ผาแดงนางไอ่ ภาควิชาภาษาไทยมหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ มหาสารคาม 2513.

Wajuppa Tossa, *Phadaeng Nang Ai: A Translation of a Thai/Lao Folk Epic In Verse*, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> พระอารีชัยฯ พญาคันคาก ศูนย์อนุรักษ์วรรณคดีภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ มหาสารคาม 2524.

Wajuppa Tossa, *Phya Khankhaak, the Toad King: A Translation of an Isan Fertility Myth Into English Verse*, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1996.

**Professor John Hartmann and Wat Thamuang, Roi-et**

I became involved in the preservation of palm-leaf manuscript only very recently. In 1992, Professor Dr. John Hartmann from Northern Illinois came to visit and went to see a temple in Roi-Et because he heard about how the abbot set up a room full of computers to teach computer skills to the youth in the village. To his amazement, in the same room full of computers he saw many shelves full of wrapped palm-leaf manuscripts. The abbot himself did not read the palm-leaf manuscripts, but he took very good care of them. Dr. Hartmann showed me a videotape of the place, but I had no time to visit until September 2001. The abbot showed me the room where there were wrapped palm-leaf manuscripts on the shelves and only one computer. His computers were out of date so he had stopped the project.

**Wat Pa Sakdaram and the Palm-leaf Manuscript Collection**

When Phra Ajan Kaew, the abbot of Wat Thamuang, heard that I was interested in palm-leaf manuscripts, he took me to another nearby temple called Wat Pa Sakdaram. There we saw piles of old palm-leaf manuscripts on a table in the meeting hall full of black bugs with hard wings, the size of ladybugs. The people there told us that the palm leaves had been stored in a northern Thai styled building on stilts, and when the abbot found the bugs, he had the palm-leaf texts removed. It was greatly alarming to find out what was happening.

Later the same year, when Dr. Hartmann came to visit, the writer took him to see the temples again. The Thamuang temple was still the same, but when we went to Wat Pa Sakdaram, there were some changes. We did not meet the abbot, but we saw wrapped palm-leaf manuscripts with clear labels of the contents on shelves in the temple hall. All these manuscripts were new. The abbot of Wat Pa Sakdaram, who was quite young and could read and write all the old scripts, had copied them from the old palm-leaf texts onto new ones and kept the old ones in the same building.

Seeing the palm-leaf manuscripts on the shelves, I felt that young people should have the chance to know them and to learn from them. I mentioned this to Phra Inta, and then took Khun Phaiboon to visit the two temples. He was interested in finding out what was in the palm-leaf manuscripts and was willing to publish them after they were transliterated and simplified. So, I proposed to find students from Mahasarakham University to go to the temple and to read and transliterate the palm-leaf manuscripts, and Khun Phaiboon offered to give a modest per diem to the students. One of the students volunteered to work for the project, but only for a very short time, and the project did not work out because the student was too busy with his studies. All he could do was to check some of the titles of the palm-leaf manuscripts and select one of them for the project.

### **Ajan Rachan Ninlawannapha and Traditional Folk Literature**

I then asked Ajan Rachan Ninlawannapha from the Thai Department to transliterate the palm-leaf text, which is now finished and is being re-written by Phra Inta to submit to Khlang Nanatham. Ajan Rachan also met one of the teacher-supervisors from Roi-et who was transliterating the text of the Wetsantara Scroll, and together they plan to re-catalogue all the palm-leaf texts and do some transliteration of the texts.

Phra Inta had heard about the palm-leaf manuscripts from Wat Pa Sakdaram, where he was told that the abbot was going to bury some of the old palm-leaf manuscript to build a stupa or to burn them and use the ash to make Buddha images. This was the reason he had copied the old texts. Phra Inta wanted to read the old palm-leaf manuscripts before this work began.

From the above incident, two ways of preserving and disseminating the old palm-leaf texts could be considered. The most effective way would be to teach people to be literate in ancient scripts so that they can read the old texts. The Research Institute of Northeast Thai Art and Culture is attempting to help by offering courses on how to read old scripts. But there have not been many young people interested in learning. Thus, another proposal could be that palm-leaf manuscripts be preserved, transliterated, simplified, and published in modern scripts for the younger generation to have access.

### **Modern Media and Traditional Literature**

After publishing the readable versions of the old palm-leaf texts, the next step to get young people to be interested in traditional literature is perhaps by using modern media. Then the stories can be developed into some kind of interactive CD ROM where the readers can read, listen to the reading, and responding to some of the questions. In doing this, we may have to work with computer experts. If there is a website where general audience could access it would be helpful as well. The website [www.seasite.niu.edu/lao](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao) of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University is one of the best resources. Their format of teaching languages could be used for this purpose.

### **Dissemination of Traditional Literature: Picturebooks and the Presentation of Palm-leaf Manuscripts**

After the texts are simplified and published, another way of disseminating the materials is in picturebook form, reworked and illustrated with the help of artists. Good examples of folktales presented in picturebook format are those by Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald, such as *The Girl Who Wore Too Much*, a Thai/Lao folktale. There are efforts to make picturebooks in both Thailand and Laos, but these are not as attractive and durable. Dr. Read MacDonald said once that to have one good quality book is much better than to have many that are inferior in quality. Children can read and re-read these many times and

absorb the stories and the art work. After quality picturebooks are produced, I think it is also necessary to present them to younger audiences by means of picturebook reading performances. The Children's Cultural Center and the National Library of Laos are doing a great job on this. Their staff members are well trained, and their efforts should be more recognized and their work extended and expanded.

In terms of picturebook production, we could get children involved as well by organizing workshops on the art of picturebooks for young people and having them try their hand at making them. An example of children's work in producing a picturebook called *Three Friends* was done as part of a research project on the *Use of Folktales, Storytelling, and Picturebooks in Teaching English*.

### **More Usage of Traditional Literature in Teaching and Research**

With that example comes another idea for disseminating traditional literature. Scholars in different fields can make use of these materials. As an English teacher, I have tried to use traditional literature in my teaching and found that students improved their English immensely. The method of teaching English by using traditional literature has been proposed to many English teachers via the seminars and workshops conducted while the storytelling project was most active (1995-1998), many of whom have applied some of the stories in their teaching. If we can get more English teachers in Thailand and Laos to do this, younger people will be well informed about their own cultural heritage. To prove that this method works, we conducted the experimental research project mentioned above, in which schoolchildren in the first year of secondary school were taught for two months using folktales, storytelling, and picturebooks in teaching English. It was discovered that children's English improved in all four skills.<sup>6</sup>

Activities in the research were storytelling performances of Thai/Lao folktales, reading of picturebooks to the students, having them retell the stories and record what they could remember in their journals. After each story was done, comprehension quizzes were given. The students were also given time to do a free reading period of the picturebooks and write down their impressions of English words or sentences that they liked. The research results showed that students of all types, the excellent students, the above average, the average, and the weak students, improved their writing skill immensely. In order to be more convinced of the method and research findings, further experimental research was conducted with a different group of year 1 secondary school students, focusing on their writing skills. The new group of students was taught by using more folktales, storytelling, picturebooks, and journal writing for one month, and each had a pre-test to mark their writing ability before the experiment began. During the experiment, we videotaped their participation and learning behaviour and afterwards we gave a post-test to check whether their writing had

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<sup>6</sup> Wajuppa Tossa, *Teaching English by Using Folktales, Storytelling, and Picturebooks, a research funded by the Research Affairs of Mahasarakham University*, November 2003.

improved. We also used the technique with teachers in order to see the rate of improvement in writing and to convince teachers to use the technique in their teaching of English. The results were most satisfactory. By doing the research and giving workshops like this, we hope to disseminate works of traditional literature among English teachers who will then teach them to their students. Thus, there will be more young people interested in traditional materials.

### **Storytelling Performances, Camps, and Workshops and Dissemination of Traditional Literature**

Finally, here is a proposal on how to “secure the goal of keeping alive for future generations the rich literary heritage of Laos” and northeast Thailand. I propose that traditional literature, whether it is from the palm-leaf manuscripts or from the interviews with our elders, be collected, adjusted for performances, and to set occasions for performances for the younger generation. These occasions could be in any gathering of younger students. We can add storytelling as part of the entertainment. We could also organize various kinds of camps and use storytelling as part of the activities. In the classrooms, we could provide teachers with these traditional stories in Lao and in English so they could be used in both Lao and English classrooms. We could also organize traditional storytelling festivals and contests with prizes. There are so many occasions when we could use traditional literature.

### **Story-Theater in the Dissemination of Traditional Literature**

In terms of the style of telling stories, we may have to adjust techniques to suit the taste of the younger generation, since they have been influenced by fast pace technologies. In the storytelling project to engender pride in local languages and literature that was conducted in 1995-1998, we were trained to collect and adjust traditional literature, and to retell in the story-theater style of Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald. When we gave performances to the children, it was very successful. We used a lot of audience participation in the performances because the younger people are familiar with this from concerts by modern performers where they have to raise their right hands and dance along. When we use this technique in telling stories to the younger generations, it works. Some examples of the story-theater style that we use are given below.

### **What Is Story-Theater?**

In telling stories using the story-theater style, we include facial expressions, voices, emotions, body movements, and gestures. Stories can be told by a single teller, taking the roles of all characters in the story as well as the role of storyteller. The first example is the story adapted for teaching English in the research mentioned earlier. For this story, a group of first year secondary school students from Wapipathum School did the illustrations. The pictures could be shown while telling the story. The story is called “Three Friends,” a Buddhist *Jataka* tale adapted from the versions of Phra Inta Kawewong of Roi-Et and Manatchanok Thongkanok.



**Three Friends<sup>7</sup>**

An Example of a Storytelling Performance by a Single Teller:

*Once upon a time, a long time ago, the elephant, the monkey, and the quail were friends. They lived in the Banyan tree. In the morning, the quail flew away, the monkey swung away, and the elephant walked away. In the evening, the quail flew back, the monkey swung back, and the elephant walked back.*

*One day the elephant said, "We have been friends for a long time, but we have no leader among us."*

*The monkey said, "Let's find the leader."*

*The quail said, "Good idea! The oldest person can be our leader."*

*The elephant said, "Who is the oldest among us?"*

*The monkey said, "Who is the oldest among us?"*

*The quail said, "Who is the oldest among us? Let's go ask the Banyan tree."*

*The elephant said, "Banyan Tree, who is the oldest among us?"*

*The monkey said, "Banyan Tree, who is the oldest among us?"*

*The quail said, "Banyan Tree, who is the oldest among us?"*

*The Banyan tree said, "Elephant, Monkey, and Quail, when did you first come here?"*

*The elephant said, "I came here when the Banyan tree was as tall as my stomach."*

*The monkey said, "I came here when the Banyan tree was as tall as my head."*

*The quail said, "I came here when the Banyan tree was a seed. I dropped the seed here.*

*Then the seed sprouted and the Banyan tree grew, and grew, and grew to be a big tall tree."*

*The Banyan tree said, "I know, the quail is the oldest. You are the leader."*

*The elephant and the monkey paid full respect to the quail as their leader. The quail was a good leader. So, the elephant, the monkey, and the quail lived happily ever after.*

When telling *Three Friends*, the storyteller is animated with a lot of gestures and repetitions for the purpose of teaching English. Students hear the same sentences at least three times and by the third time they should be able to say those sentences and remember them. The next example is a story retold by two persons or in storytelling terms this is called "tandem telling." The story illustrated here is *The Pious-Son-In-Law*. This story is in the book by Supaporn Vattanapreeda called *Thai Tales*. In this style of telling stories, two storytellers will take part as storytellers and characters; one is the father-in-law and the other is the son-in-law.

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<sup>7</sup> A Buddhist *Jataka* tale adapted from the versions of Phra Inta Kawewong of Roi-et and Manatchanok Thongkanok. The sole copyright of the entire text of the story, *Three Friends*, belongs to Dr. Wajuppa Tossa.

***The Pious Son-in-Law***<sup>8</sup>

An example of Tandem-Telling:

*Nai Dee was a rich farmer.  
His rice fields stretched in all directions.*

*But Nai Dee did not approve of his new son-in-law, Thid Kham.  
Thid Kham was a very pious man.  
He had spent many years in the monkhood  
And still retained his pious nature.*

*One day as the father-in-law and his new son-in-law  
Were walking, Nai Dee began to brag.  
“Look at all of these fields!  
All of this is mine!  
The rice is just being planted now, but when the harvest comes  
I will be a very rich man.”*

*Thid Kham looked over the rice field and spoke cautiously.  
“Father-in-law this is not certain.  
The rice grows well now, but a flood might come and spoil the crop.  
Remember what the Lord Buddha has said,  
Dai dai nai lok luan anijang. Nothing is certain.”*

*The father-in-law did not like to hear this.  
He was angry but kept silent.*

*Some weeks later the two walked again in the fields.*

*“See Thid Kham. There was no flood.  
The rice is blooming now. There is sure to be a good harvest!”*

*But Thid Kham still was cautious.  
“This is not certain, father-in-law.  
Yes, the rice is blooming.  
But insects might come and eat the rice before it can be harvested.  
Remember what the Lord Buddha has said,*

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted From *Thai Tales: Folktales Of Thailand* by Supaporn Vathanaprida. Edited by Margaret Read Macdonald Libraries Unlimited, 1994. Supaporn Vathanaprida and Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald have the sole copyright of the entire text of the story.

Dai dai nai lok luan anijang. Nothing is certain.”

*His father-in-law was furious to hear these words  
From his son-in-law.  
He waited until the rice was hanging  
Heavy and ripe on its stalks.  
Then he walked with Thid Kham to the fields again.*

*“Now will you stop your foolish sayings.  
See, the rice is ripe. Floods did not come.  
Insects did not come.  
This is certain. I am a rich man.”*

*“I do not believe this is certain, father-in-law.  
I can see that the grain is ripe.  
But it is not harvested yet.  
Fire might sweep through the fields and burn it all.  
No, you must remember the words of the Lord Buddha.  
Dai dai nai lok luan anijang. Nothing is certain.”*

*The father-in-law could hardly keep his temper.  
As soon as the rice was harvested  
And stored in the granaries  
He brought Thid Kham to see.*

*“Now LOOK. There was no flood, no insects, no fire.  
This is now a certain thing. You can see for yourself!”*

*But still Thid Kham hesitated.  
“Yes, I can see the rice.  
But still mice may come and eat it.  
I must repeat the words of the Lord Buddha,  
Dai dai nai lok luan anijang! Nothing is certain!”*

*The father-in-law was furious.  
He ordered some of the rice cooked  
And brought Thid Kham to his house.  
“Here Thid Kham.  
The rice grew, it bloomed, it ripened, it was harvested,  
It was put in the storehouse, nothing bad had happened to it.  
Now at least you must admit that this is a sure thing.  
Eat a mouthful and you will see!*

*Thid Kham lifted the rice to his mouth.  
He was just about to taste it.  
But he paused.  
“Father-in-law, I can see that the rice did grow,  
It did ripen, it was harvested and stored.  
All this is true. Still I must repeat the words  
Of the Lord Buddha to you,  
Dai dai nai lok luan anijang. Nothing is certain.”*

*The father-in-law could control his anger no longer.  
He reached out his hand and slapped the bowl of rice  
From Thid Kham's hand.  
“Then leave my house! You will never stop  
With this foolish saying!”*

*Thid Kham slowly picked up the rice bowl from the floor  
And looked at his father-in-law.*

*“But you can see for yourself the wisdom  
Of our Lord Buddha's words,” said Thid Kham.  
“The rice was planted, it bloomed, it ripened,  
It was harvested, it was stored, it was cooked,  
And was almost in my mouth. And yet it was lost to me.  
Surely no one here can doubt the truth of this saying,  
Dai dai nai lok luan anijang. Nothing is certain.”*

*And at last his father-in-law was silent.  
It's true, “Dai dai nai lok luan anijang. Nothing is certain.”*

### ***Field Mouse May We Have Some Rice?<sup>9</sup>***

A story told by three persons in story-theater style using *phaya* verses. The listeners will be exposed to simple *phaya* and later they may want to learn more about them:

*Once Turtle Dove and Taedtae Bird were good friends.  
Everyday they would go out to eat grains and sing happily together.*

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<sup>9</sup> A Thai/Lao Folktale from Oeynang and Wassana, *A Collection of Isan Folktales*, Bangkok: Chomromdek, 1995, retold in English by Wajuppa Tossa and Prasong Saihong. Dr. Wajuppa Tossa has the sole copyright of the entire English text of the story.

Ta lud tud tu ta lud tud tu

Ta laed taed tae ta laed taed tae

*One day at the end of the harvest season, the turtle dove said to taedtae bird,*

*“Friend, taed tae bird, let’s go to eat grains that farmers have dropped in the fields.”*

*“Yes, that’s a good idea. Let’s go.”*

*So they went singing their songs happily:*

Ta lud tud tu ta lud tud tu

Ta laed taed tae ta laed taed tae

Ta lud tud tu ta lud tud tu

Ta laed taed tae ta laed taed tae

*At that time, a field mouse was picking up rice grains and ran to his hole - up and down, up and down, up and down.*

*The two birds flew near where the field mouse was and continued singing:*

Ta lud tud tu ta lud tud tu

Ta laed taed tae ta laed taed tae

*So, he said to them: “Why you two singing ta lud tud tu ta laed taed tae so early in the morning? Why don’t you store the rice for the rainy season?”*

*The Taedtae Bird became annoyed so she said:*

“เจ้าหนูชิงตาสวด เจ้าผู้รอดปัญญา      cao nuu xing taa suad cao phuu uad panya

เฮาผู้ดีหนักหนา บ่ต้องมาเทศนาสั่งสอน      hao huu dii nak naa bo tong maa thetsana sang son”

*“You, field mouse with bulgy eyes!*

*You think you are so wise?*

*You have no right to tell us what to do.”*

*The Turtle Dove saw that the field mouse was upset. So she said:*

“พ่อเจ้าหนูชิงตาสวย เจ้าผู้รวยปัญญา      pho cao nuu xing ta suay cao phuu ruay panya

ขอบใจหนักหนาที่มำตักเตือนมุข่อย      khob cai nak naa thii maa tak tuan muu khoy”

*“You field mouse, with beautiful brown eyes!*

*You are so wise.*

*Thank you very much for your good advice.*

*We appreciated that.”*

*The field mouse felt a little bit better and said to the Turtle Dove:*

“โอ ฟอนกเขาคูู้ ผู้ขันคุณเสียงเสนาะ      Oh pho nok khao tuu phuu khan khuu siang sano

ให้เจ้าไปไล่เก็บ เขาใส่เล่าไว้      hai cao pai lo kep khao sai lao wai

เพื่อขามฝนสิได้มีเขากิน

phua yaam phon si dai mii khao kin”

*“Yes, my dear Turtle Dove who sings beautiful songs.*

*You should store the rice before the rain comes.*

*Or, you won’t have anything to eat.”*

*The field mouse continued with his work. But the two birds did not store the rice. They continued eating and singing happily.*

Ta lud tud tu ta lud tud tu

Ta laed taed tae ta laed taed tae

*Then, one dark cloudy day, it began to rain. It rained hard, it rained harder, and harder,...*

*The field mouse quickly scooped up mud to fill his hole. So his stored rice would be dry. He went up and down, up and down, up and down...*

*Now, the two birds saw what was happening. So the Turtle Dove said:*

*“Oh, friend Taedtae, it’s raining harder. The rice will be wet and all gone. Shouldn’t we store some rice?”*

*“Yes, that’s a good idea.” Said the Taedtae Bird.*

*So they tried to pick up some grains. But it rained harder even harder. The rice was washed away in the storm. When the storm was over, the two birds came out hungry.*

*So the Taedtae Bird said, “It rained so hard. There is no rice left. I am so hungry.”*

*“Me too. What shall we do?” asked the Turtle Dove. Then Taedtae Bird had an idea and said:*

*“Why don’t we ask for some rice from the field mouse? He stored a lot of rice.”*

*But the Turtle dove said: “I am embarrassed because he told us to store the rice, but we did not.”*

*“Aren’t you hungry?” “I am.” “If you don’t go, I WILL.”*

*So the Taedtae Bird flew to the mouse’s hole singing weakly:*

Ta laed taed tae ta laed taed tae

*Once she got at the mouse’s hole, she stomped her feet and said:*

“เจ้าหนูซิงตาสวด

cao nuu xing taa suad

เจ้าผู้หนวดรุงรัง

cao phuu nuad lung ling

แน่จริงออกมา เฮาหิว เฮาหิว

nae cing ok maa hao hew hao hew”

*“You field mouse with bulgy eyes.*

*Why are you hiding? Open the door!*

*I am hungry. Give me some rice.”*

*The startled field mouse ran up to the entrance of the hole and said to the Taedtae Bird:*

*“You noisy bird, why are you singing ta laed taed tae so early in the morning? How absurd you are to bother me like this!*

*Get out! Get out! GET OUT!”*

*The Taedtae Bird flew back to her friend swiftly!*

*“Did he give you anything to eat?” said Turtle Dove.*

*“Oh, no he didn’t give me anything. He kicked me out as well.” Said the Taedtae Bird.*

*“Then let me try” said Turtle Dove. So she went to the field mouse and gently knocked at the door:*

“พ่อเจ้าหนูซิงดาสวย	pho cao nuu xing ta suay
พ่อขนสลวยหนวดงาม	pho khon saluay nuad ngaam
มีเขกมาเยียมมาหยาม	mii khaek maa yiam maa yaam
เปิดฝักตูออกมาเน	poed phaktuu ok maa nae”

*“Knock, knock, knock,  
Oh, my dear field mouse  
With beautiful brown eyes  
And soft shiny fur,  
You have a visitor please come on out.”  
The field mouse smiled and opened the door to say:*

“โอ ฟอนกเขาคู ฟอขันกุเสียงเสนาะ	Oh pho nok khao tuu phuu khan khuu siang sano
บ่ต้องมาเ็นมาเคาะ	bo tong maa oen maa kho
เข้ามาโหลด เข้ามาโหลด	khao maa load khao maa load”

*“Oh, it’s you, my dear Turtle Dove  
Who sings beautiful songs  
Come along inside  
And have some rice with me.”  
And so the Turtle Dove had some rice with the mouse and she was no longer hungry.  
But the Taedtae Bird did not have any rice because she was not nice to the field mouse.*

***Maeng Nguan (The Singing Cricket)***<sup>10</sup>

An example of the adaptation of traditional literature collected from an interview with Phoyai Bunyok Saensunthon. There are at least five storytellers in this kind of performance. Members of the audience can be asked to take some part in the performance if there are not enough storytellers in the troupe:

*A long time ago, heaven and earth were very close.  
People from heaven could go to earth easily  
And people from earth could go to heaven very easily too.  
In heaven Indra was the highest god.*

*One night, Indra heard a beautiful sound of music that went*

*“yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong  
yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong  
yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong”\**

*“That was a beautiful song. I want to hear more of the song.  
And I will give a reward to the singer,” Indra said to himself.  
Then he sent his people down to earth to find the singer.*

*Once they were on earth, they beat on their gongs,*

*“kajong ngong kajong ngong jao kha oey!  
kajong ngong kajong ngong jao kha oey!  
kajong ngong kajong ngong jao kha oey!”#*

*And said “whoever sang the beautiful song last night, please step forward.  
Indra wants to hear more of your song.”*

*The gekko stepped forward and said,  
“It’s me that sang the beautiful song last night.”  
“Oh, you did. Would you come to sing for Great Indra tonight?”  
“Yes, I would,” said the gekko.*

*“Then tell me what I need to prepare for your performance tonight for Great Indra,” asked one of Indra’s people.*

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<sup>10</sup> A folktale from Laos by Mr. Bunyok Saensunthon, Vientiane, Laos, retold in English by Wajuppa Tossa. Dr. Wajuppa Tossa has the sole copyright of the entire English text of the story.



*“Oh, you must prepare a good size bamboo pipe and hang it on a pillar at Great Indra's hall,” said the gekko.*

*All was done before night fell. Late that night, the gekko went up to heaven, crawled inside the bamboo pipe, and began his song,*

*“thod, thod, thod, tukkae, tukkae, tukkae.  
thod, thod, thod, tukkae, tukkae, tukkae.  
thod, thod, thod, tukkae, tukkae, tukkae.”*

*Great Indra came out of his hall and said,*

*“Oh, Gekko, did you sing that beautiful song?”*

*“Yes, My Lord,” said the gekko proudly.*

*“I will give you a gift,” said Great Indra.*

*He went to his wardrobe and brought out a multi-colored vest.*

*“Here Gekko, this is a gift for you to show that you have come up to heaven to sing for Great Indra.”*

*“Thank you, My Lord,” said the gekko and went down to earth.*

*Since then the gekko has a multi-colored body.*

*After the gekko was gone, late that night, Great Indra again heard the beautiful song,*

\*

*Indra said, “Gekko’s song was beautiful, but this one is heavenly.”*

*So Indra sent his people down to earth to find the singer.*

*Once they were on earth, they beat on their gongs,*

#

*The bullfrog stepped forward and said,*

*“It's me that sang the beautiful song last night.”*

*“Oh, you did. Would you come to sing for Great Indra tonight?”*

*“Yes, I would,” said the bullfrog.*

*“Then tell me what I need to prepare for your performance tonight for Great Indra,” asked one of Indra’s people.*

*“Oh, you must prepare a large bowl of water and place it at the foot of the stairs of Great Indra’s hall,” said the bullfrog.*

*All was done before night fell.*

*Late that night, the bullfrog went to heaven,*

*Crawled onto the bowl of water, and began his song,*

*“hueng aang, hueng aang, hueng aang.”*

*Great Indra came out of his hall and said,  
 "Oh, Bullfrog, did you sing that beautiful song?"  
 "Yes, My Lord," said the bullfrog proudly.  
 "I will give you a gift," said Great Indra.  
 He went to his wardrobe and brought out a striped vest.  
 "Here Bullfrog, this is a gift for you to show that you have come up to heaven to sing for  
 Great Indra."  
 "Thank you, My Lord," said the bullfrog and went down to earth.  
 Since then the bullfrog has a striped body.*

*After the bullfrog was gone, late that night, Great Indra again heard, the beautiful song,*

\*

*Indra said, "Bullfrog's song was beautiful, but this one is heavenly."  
 So Indra sent his people down to earth to find the singer.  
 Once they were on earth, they beat on their gongs,*

#

*The little cricket stepped forward and said,  
 "Oh, maybe it's me that sang the beautiful song last night."  
 "Oh, you did. Would you come to sing for Great Indra tonight?"  
 "Yes, I would," said the little cricket.  
 "Yes, I would," said the little cricket.  
 "Then tell me what I need to prepare for your performance tonight for Great Indra," asked  
 one of Indra's people.  
 "Absolutely nothing!" said the cricket.  
 "I will just fly to light at a pillar of Great Indra's hall and sing," said Maeng Nguan, the  
 singing cricket.*

*So that night Maeng Nguan the singing cricket went up to heaven to light at a pillar of Great  
 Indra's hall and began singing,*

\*

*Great Indra came out of his hall and said,  
 "Oh, Cricket, did you sing that heavenly song?"  
 "Yes, My Lord," said the little cricket.  
 "I will give you a gift of divine eyes and food," said Great Indra.  
 "From now on you can see both day and night and you can enjoy divine food,  
 Dew drops from heaven."*

*“Thank you, My Lord,” said the little cricket.*

*Since then Maeng Nguan, the singing cricket, can see both day and night. He also enjoys divine food, dew drops from heaven.*

*He then continues singing,*

*“yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong  
yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong  
yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong yong, yong, yong”*

*And that’s the story of Maeng Nguan, the Singing Cricket.*

### ***Phya Khankhaak, The Toad King*<sup>11</sup>**

An example of the performance of traditional literature from a palm-leaf manuscript with audience participation. The last story to be illustrated here is a story that requires the entire body of the audience to participate. The audience can take part as each character mentioned in the chant. They can come out dancing in the procession. The story is from a palm-leaf manuscript transliterated by Phra Ariyanuwat of Wat Mahachai Mahasarakham:

*When Phya Khankhaak was born,*

*His mother was the queen.*

*And his father was the king.*

*But, the baby looked just like a toad!*

*Of course no one said anything about the way he looked.*

*Still, everyone called him “Khankhaak,”*

*Which means “toad.” It even sounds like a toad.*

*“Khan KHAAK!”*

*And as he grew, he continued to look more and more like a... toad.*

*He was a little toad boy.*

*Then he was a little toad teenager.*

*By the time Khankhaak was 20, he was tired of looking like a toad.*

*He told his father that he wanted a palace of his own.*

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<sup>11</sup>A Thai/Lao folktale by Phra Ariyanuwat Khemajari translated by Wajuppa Tossa in *Phya Khankhaak, the Toad King: A Translation of an Isan Fertility Myth in Verse*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996. This version is adapted by Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald. Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald and Dr. Wajuppa Tossa have the sole copyright of the entire English text of the story.

*He wanted a palace with 1,000 rooms and 10,000 pillars...  
 And a jeweled roof.  
 And he wanted a beautiful wife too!  
 His father said, "Impossible!"*

*But one of the gods, Indra, liked Khankhaak.  
 Indra created a palace with 1,000 rooms, 10,000 pillars, and a jeweled roof.  
 There was even a beautiful young lady in the palace!  
 When Khankhaak saw all this, he was delighted.  
 "YES!" And he quickly peeled off his toad-form!  
 It came off just like a suit of clothes.  
 And there stood Khankhaak, as handsome as a god!  
 Now he was called Phya Khankhaak, LORD Khankhaak.  
 He was so popular that everyone came to his palace.  
 Soon no one was paying attention to Phya Thaen, the god of the heavens.  
 Phya Thaen became angrier and angrier.  
 At last he took action.  
 Phya Thaen forbade the naga to swim anymore in his golden pond.  
 Whenever the naga swam, they flipped their tails and splashed water out of  
 The pond.  
 This water fell to the earth as rain.  
 If the naga could not swim...  
 No rain ever fell on the earth below.  
 Soon people were suffering.  
 Their crops withered, their streams dried up.*

*When Khankhaak saw this,  
 He called together a large army to march to heaven.  
 They would demand that Phya Thaen let rain fall.  
 Not only humans joined the march,  
 But all of the animals came too.  
 The animals were suffering very much without rain.  
 Which animals do you think might have come along?  
 (Let children suggest animals, ask them what noise that animal makes, ask  
 For volunteers to help make that animal sound and be the monkeys, elephants,  
 Make sure everyone has a part, then continue the story)*

*Off they marched to heaven.*

โธ่ โธ่ โธ่ โธ่โธ่ โธ่ โธ่ ปาดติงโท แถนมันเป็นฮ้าย มันบ่ให้ฝนตกลงมา มาเฮามา มาสู้กับแถน  
 Oh ho oh ho oh ho oh paad ting thoo thaen man pen hai man bo hai pho tok long maa maa hao  
 maa maa suu kap thaen

*They were chanting:*

*Phya Thaen!*

*Give us rain!*

*Phya Thaen!*

*Give us rain!*

*Phya Thaen heard them coming.*

*Their chants frightened him.*

*“Maybe I should let them have their rain.”*

*When they reached his palace, they halted.*

*Then all together they let out their most ferocious roar!*

*(Cue children to all make their animal noises as loud as possible on the  
 Count of three)*

*Phya Thaen was terrified!*

*“OK! OK! You may have your water!”*

*Phya Thaen sent the naga into the Golden Pond at once.*

*They began to swim around and swish their tails.*

*Soon water began to splash over the edge of the pond.*

*And the cool water began to fall to the earth.*

*So Phya Khankhaak led his great army back down to earth.*

*But before he left the heavens, he made Phya Thaen promise*

*NEVER to stop the rains again.*

*Phya Thaen promised.*

*But the Lao people of Isan don’t exactly trust Phya Thaen to keep his word.*

*So every year, they shoot rockets into the sky just to remind him.*

*Phya Thaen!*

*Give us RAIN!*

*Phya Thaen!*

*Give us RAIN!*

*And usually...the rain falls.*

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, with the goal of keeping traditional literature alive among the younger generation, we, the old generation, need to work in locating palm-leaf manuscripts, preserving them, transliterating them into modern scripts, rewriting them into simpler verses, transforming them into means that are attractive to the young such as in interactive CD ROM, in attractive and durable picturebook formats, in the classrooms, in research, and in storytelling performances.