

Preservation and Revitalization of Cultural Heritage Through Various Activities In The First International Storytelling Festival In Thailand

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Abstract:

As a founder and coordinator of The First Mahasarakham University International Storytelling Festival 2013 which is the first international storytelling in Thailand, Wajuppa Tossa has successfully brought together international storytellers, local traditional storytellers, and young people during 1-3 February 2013. The festival attracted more than 300 people of all ages to enjoy various activities. The event comprised three keynote addresses by administrators of the three host institutions; 12 master class workshops on various aspects of folktales and the art of storytelling and more; two storytelling showcases; story sharing and swap; one storytelling concert by traditional storytellers from the north and northeast of Thailand (Isan) ; a storytelling contest of budding storytellers; a folktale-based picturebook contest; a drawing contest to illustrate one of the stories told in the festival; and the finale of storytelling performance by winners of the storytelling contest. In this presentation, Dr. Tossa demonstrates how each activity in the festival helps to preserve and revitalize cultural heritage of the young and the elders. From all activities in the festival, many folktales have been collected. Dr. Tossa intends to seek permissions from storytellers to publish a special collection of these folktales told in the festival which will be a valuable resource for libraries and the study of folklore. Moreover, some of the folktales could be performed in public libraries as a part of various storytelling sessions. They will help to promote further reading of more folktale collections for the children and adults alike. In this session, Dr. Tossa will also give storytelling performance using sample stories told in the festival. Participants in this presentation will learn of Dr. Tossa's commitment and determination in revitalizing storytelling traditions all over the world. They will leave the presentation with a smile and a handful of folktales to share with others.

Keywords: international storytelling festival, international and traditional storytellers, revitalization of cultural heritage, folktale collections, storytelling performances in public libraries

Preservation and Revitalization of Cultural Heritage Through Various Activities In The First International Storytelling Festival In Thailand

Background

Storytelling has long been embedded in Thai people's lives, yet in the recent times this tradition has been neglected. In the past, parents or elders in the family would spend time with the children sharing heart-warming and wondrous tales with their children. There was no gap between the young and the old. In community gatherings, storytelling would be one form of entertainment. Elders would read stories from palm leaf manuscripts and folk opera performers would sing stories from the old times with music accompaniment of *khaen* (northeast Thai wind musical instrument made of bamboo pipes with silver reed at the mouth piece). It was magical to be in such gatherings, as one would feel the love, warmth, and fellowship of the people all around. Children would be both entertained and educated. They would enjoy the music and stories that provide moral lessons, proper ways of conduct in the society, and a special place in the imaginary lands. That kind of magical experience has been taken away from children as the modern form of entertainments, educational and commercial media have taken over. In the present days, it is not easy for parents or grandparents to provide such warm atmosphere for their young. Parents are busy with earning their incomes to raise the family; young people are busy with tutoring outside of their classroom to compete with others for higher levels of education. Worse of all, some young people are indulged in violent video games and drugs. To bring back the magic experiences for children and adults, three major organizations namely Mahasarakham University (The Pure Thai Project, International Affairs Division, Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty, Education Faculty, The Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture, SPAFA (SEAMEO SPAFA, Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts--part of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and Central University of Jharkhand, India hosted The First Mahasarakham University International Storytelling Festival 2013 (MSUISF2013) at Mahasarakham University during 1-3 February 2013. The festival aimed to open an international arena of traditional and international storytelling performances for the first time in Thailand; second, to offer opportunities for students and youths in ASEAN, Southeast Asian countries, and India to meet and exchange ideas and information on traditional storytelling, local wisdom, and other cultural heritage related areas; third, to offer opportunities for teachers, educators, and interested people to learn and share knowledge relating to the preservation and revitalization of folktales and storytelling traditions as well as sharing of wisdom, cultural values, beliefs and ways of lives through sharing of folktales; to build international networks of storytellers and storytelling traditions; and to bring our university into the international recognition in terms of cultural knowledge and studies.

Participants in the Festival

Participants in the festival included international storytellers, traditional storytellers, storytelling and drawing contestants from elementary and secondary schools and universities, teachers, members of non-governmental sectors, and villagers. The festival aimed to attract around 300 people in the entire festival, but the number of participants came up to more than 300 people each day. Most participants from the first day continued to come to the festival on the second and third day, but the university students, particularly those from Mahasarakham University varied each day depending on their class schedules. The attendance was the result of advertisements by letters of invitation sent to educational institutions around Thailand, words of mouth, and in the social network like facebook. SPAFA, as a co-host,

contributed to the festival by sponsoring storytellers from Indonesia, Philippines, Laos, and Lahu tribe in northern Thailand. Education Faculty invited 13 students and professors from Vietnam to participate and share traditional music and dance performances as well as stories in the festival. Central University of Jharkhand, India, sponsored 6 professors and students to participate and lead a workshop session in the festival. Other international storytellers responded to a call for participation in the festival via facebook advertisement. Traditional storytellers were those who have received awards from Mahasarakham University in the Honoring Traditional Storytellers Project in the past two years. Formal letters of invitation and telephone calls were sent to them personally. Participants came from various professions, teachers, storytellers, students (elementary, secondary, and university levels), international and non-governmental organizations, farmers, and housewives. The following table shows the details of participants in the festival.

Table 1: Participants of the Festival

Date of the Festival	International Storytellers	Traditional Storytellers	Contestants	International attendees	Local attendees	Total
1 February	20	20	43	36	201	310
2 February	20	20	43	36	200	309
3 February	20	20	43	36	191	300

Table 2: International Storytellers / Educators

Countries	Number of International Storytellers /Educators	Sponsors
The United States of America	2	Faculty of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty
Singapore /Australia	1 Storyteller 1 Educator	Faculty of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty
Indonesia	4	Faculty of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty
	1	SPAFA
Malaysia	1	Faculty of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty
India	1	Faculty of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty
	5 Educators	Central University of Jharkhand
United Kingdom	1	Faculty of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty

Countries	Number of International Storytellers /Educators	Sponsors
Philippines	2 storytellers	SPAFA
Laos	2 storytellers	SPAFA
Lahu Tribe	2 storytellers	SPAFA

Activities in the Festival

The First International Storytelling Festival 2013 provided many activities that appeal to different age groups.

The event comprised the following planned activities: 3 keynote addresses by administrators of the three host institutions; 12 master class workshops on various aspects of folktales and the art of storytelling and more; two storytelling showcases; story sharing and swap; one storytelling concert by traditional storytellers; a storytelling contest of budding storytellers; a folktale-based picturebook contest; a drawing contest to illustrate one of the stories told in the festival; and the finale of storytelling performance by the winners of storytelling contests. On the second night of the festival, a *baisi* (blessing) ceremony to welcome and to bless all with ties of friendship, love, care, wealth, health, happiness, and success was organized. With this ceremony came some performances from Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The festival began with the warm atmosphere of sharing of tips on Thai cultural information for international storytellers and participants and a campus tour of various research institutes such as the Silk Innovation, the Mushroom Museum, the University History Museum, and the Arts and Crafts Outlet Store. These activities provided venues for international visitors to get to know each other and to know the members of the organizing committee and to feel at home in the festival site. After a Thai welcoming dinner and reception, the storytelling event began in the evening. International storytellers told traditional stories from various cultures with unique styles of storytelling techniques. These performances enabled the audience to realize that storytelling performances came in different styles and no one style was better than the others. Each storyteller brought the folktale into life in a natural style appropriate to his or her own personality. Because the audience was a mix of people who could understand English and those who did not have English facility, the storytelling was performed in two languages, English-Thai/Lao. University students trained under Dr. Wajuppa Tossa performed in tandem with international storytellers. They were part of the success of the storytelling performances. At this first storytelling event, at least 10 folktales were collected. They will be published in a collection of folktales around the world along with other folktales in the entire festival.

On the second day of the festival, 20 elders who had been honoured with prizes from Mahasarakham University came to share their stories on stage among the international storytellers. They proved to the audience that traditional style of storytelling was as enjoyable as those from professional storytellers around the world. The festival acted as a bridge to bring the new and the old ways together. From the evaluation of the event from the audience, storytelling by the elders was very well-received. Young people appreciated the chances to feel the kindness, love, and warmth of the elders through their telling. Some said they felt moved because they missed their grandparents. After the performances, two

concurrent sessions of workshops of various topics were arranged in four small rooms for the audience to choose to attend. Among these were workshops from SPAFA's storytellers and educators and Central University of Jharkhand, India. Many more folktales have been collected both from the elders and from the international storytellers in the open stage and in the workshop sessions. In that evening, artists of various age groups applied to enter the drawing contest, illustrating stories that had been told in the first two days of the festival. There were many from elementary and secondary school levels and some from the university and general adult level in the contest. They were given two hours to draw the illustrations during the break after the workshop sessions. All of them submitted their works before the evening event was to begin so that the judges would have time to examine their works. The evening program featured the unique blessing ceremony called *baisi*.¹ The Brahmin, the leader of the ceremony would chant blessing words and then cotton strings would be distributed to each person to tie around each other's wrist for blessing and friendship. After this ceremony, dance performances by an Indonesian storyteller-dancer, Cambodian, and Vietnamese students were performed. The final activity for the evening was storytelling sharing and swap in a very friendly and warm atmosphere. These stories will be included in the collection as well.

Prior to the festival, those who wished to enter the storytelling competition and the picture book contests had sent their samples of stories for the committee to select as finalists. Thus, on morning of the third day of the festival, they were split into small groups according to the language of their choices with international storytellers as the judges. There were four major language groups namely, Thai, Lao, Khmer, and English. The best storyteller of each group was chosen to perform for the entire committee of the judges and the entire congregation of the audience.

The final session of the storytelling festival was the finale of the storytelling performances by the talented finalists of the storytelling contests. The first prize for elementary school level went to a girl from a very small village school in Yasothon. For the secondary school level, a student from Phadungnaree School in the city of Mahasarakham gave an outstanding performance. For the university level, a student from Ubonratchathani University told the trickster story of a little novice who outwitted the two elderly abbots. The story and the performance gave everyone in the audience a big smile and laughter. These stories from the contests will be featured in the collection of folktales to be published as well. Finally, the winners of all contests were announced and prizes were presented to all winners and runner ups.

The Result of Satisfaction Survey of the Festival

The survey of rating scale was used to evaluate the satisfactory of the participants of the festival. The overall evaluation of the satisfaction of the participants came up to 4.54 with SD of .62 which is very good. 91.04 % of the participants agreed that the entire festival was successful in various ways as seen in the following table.

¹ In discussing *baisi*, a Lao tradition, it is necessary to understand the concept of "*khwan*." It is believed that each person's well-being depends on their *khwan* or spirit. Each person has 32 *khwan* dwelling within his/her person. If any of the *khwan* is frightened, the person may fall ill. To help comfort a person to feel that the *khwan* is contained within his/her body, a ceremony is organized. This ceremony is called, "*bai sii suu khwan* or *suu khwan bai sii* (the ceremony of calling back spirit). This ceremony is commonly practiced among the ethnic Tai people in Southeast Asia including the Thai/Lao people in the north, the northeast, and Laos.

Table 4: Satisfactory Survey

Number	Topics	\bar{X}	SD	Interpretation
1	Procedure of the festival	4.31	.77	Good
2	Service of the staff	4.52	.65	Very Good
3	Food, facilities, and atmosphere	4.58	.63	Very Good
4	Values of the festival	4.56	.62	Very Good
5	Speakers and storytellers	4.74	.45	Very Good
	Overall Evaluation	4.54	.62	Very Good

From the above table, the festival was rated the highest level of “Very Good” with one exception of the first topic “Procedure of the festival” which was rated “Good.” This interpretation agreed with the open ended questionnaire. Most participants felt that the formal procedure such as the opening ceremony in the festival took too much time and some of the activities could be more precise and shortened. Most participants agreed that this festival should be an annual event as it helped improve their English and that the storytellers told stories in very unique and entertaining ways. Some participants felt that the keynote lectures and workshop sessions should be longer. Their most favorite activity was the storytelling performances by various kinds of storytellers. In terms of stories, five most popular stories were All Free, Adventure of Sumandak, The White Ants, Pickin’ Peas, The Twelve Sisters. The most popular storytellers included Jeeva Raghunath, The Whitman Samplers, Jasmine Carissa Wirawan, and traditional storytellers.

The Folktale Collection, the Preservation of Folktales, and Digitalized Webpage

From all the activities above, the most important concrete outcome is a collection of folktales around the world. This collection is to be published and distributed in the Second International Storytelling Festival 2014. After the publication, copies would be sent to major public libraries in all countries participated in the festival. This publication and distribution of the collection of folktales will help to preserve the folktales told by local and international storytellers, young and old.

It is also our intention to set up a web site of the storytelling performances from the festival. At this moment, the storytelling sessions have been edited. Some of the stories have been posted on YOUTUBE. Our festival was also coinciding with a television program, “The Public Stage” on Thai Public Television which was titled, “Searching for Folktales.”² The founder of this festival was also featured as one of the guests along with the award winner traditional storytellers. This program was aired on 13 April 2013 at 2 pm. In this way, our festival has contributed to the preservation and digitalization of cultural heritage through the folktales and storytelling performances. The following table details numbers of folktales collected from the festival.

² <http://203.189.117.18:9080/vod/home.php?vid=5549&ap=flase>: เวทีสาธารณะ : ตามนิทานพื้นบ้าน clip.thaipbs.or.th

Table 4: Folktales Collected in the MSUISF13

Names of Storytellers	Names of Folktales	Cultural Background
International Storytellers		
Jeeva Raghunath	All for Free	India
	Okkamma Okkayya	AndhraPradesh, India
Sheila Wee	The Basket	Nepal
	The White Ants and the Chengal Tree	Malaysia/Singapore
	Coyote and the Bird	Native American
	Watering the Neighbours Melons	China
Nathaniel Whitman	Pickin’ Peas	South USA
Jennifer Whitman	Bat’s Big Game	USA
Ng Kok Keong	Adventure of Sumandak	Borneo, Malaysia
	Alamat Ng Sibuyas, Legend of Onions	Phillipines
Kiran Shah	Platypus Story	Aboriginal Australia
	All for Free	
	Okkamma Okkayya	AndhraPradesh, India
Jasmine Carissa Wirawan	Suwedak Loro	Indonesia
	Princess Kamang	Indonesia
Bima Anggara	Oneng the Ghost Girl	Indonesia
	Masarasenani and The Sun	Papua, Indonesia
Agus Rakhman	Why Shrimps are Crooked	Indonesia
	Tiny Boy	South Sulawesi, Indonesia
Elders		
Grandma Khamphaeng Anurit	The Twelve Sisters	Thailand/Lao
Grandma Lamphu Jambairat	The Cat and the Rat—The first Animal in the Zodiac	Thailand/Lao
Grandma Jiang	The Two Wives	Thailand/Lao
	The Toad and Tiger	Thailand/Lao
Grandma Tha	Why the Duck Has Green Head and Corse Voice	Thailand/Lao
	Amina Story	Buddhist legend
Names of Storytellers	Names of Folktales	Cultural Background
Elders		
Grandma Khamplew	Merit Making Story	Thailand/Lao
Youths		
Sudarat Maensuebchaht	Treasure in the Vineyard	Aesop Fable
Saroengrom Yomseekhen	Janthakinnari	Thailand
Janthamahd Buntoem	Vessantara Prince	Buddhist <i>Jataka</i> Tale
Jettarin Nareekaew	Ao Siew Bo, Tale of the Fool	Northeast Thailand
Kosuphisai School Group	Khulu Nang Ua-Love Story	Northeast Thailand

Names of Storytellers	Names of Folktales	Cultural Background
Youths		
Thanawut Phakdeeya	The Novice and Two Abbots	Thailand/Lao
Wanlapha Seemanta	Phi Kongkoi, the Ghost	Thailand/Lao
Buriram Rajabhat University Students	Pajit Oraphim, Legend of the Khmer ruins in Phimai	Northeast Thailand

The above table shows that activities in the International storytelling festival can generate many stories or folktales that otherwise could be forgotten and lost. The organization and initiation of the international storytelling festival can help preserve the folktales as well as revitalizing them in performances. Young people of all age groups become more interested in searching for more folktales to tell and share. The elders feel that their stories are still important and needed. The fact that they are featured in the storytelling event of international recognition and being featured on a national television program encourage them to be proud of their cultural heritage. All of them have made commitment that they will continue telling and sharing their tales with the young. The folktale collection with various themes and flavour will surely be a good asset to public libraries. Those who have attended the festival will definitely be interested in reading the collection and reading more of the books of folktales. In this way, the by-product of the festival will enhance the reading promotion as well.

Apart from reading promotion, the folktales could be used as models for performances. Some schools may decide to use the folktales for their stage performances. In other countries, storytelling programs are held in public libraries to enhance the library programs and reading promotion. These folktales could be used in public libraries. In doing so, we are prolonging the life of the folktales to be vibrant in the society. This kind of activity could be suggested to Thai public library programs as well.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Storytelling both by elders and the young people are vital to the preservation of the folktales and storytelling tradition. It is our duty to try every way to encourage both the study of the folktales and the revitalization of the storytelling tradition in our society. It is important that storytelling happen in family, community, and schools. Yet, it is inevitable that these activities have become difficult to take place as the advancement of technologies is upon us. It is hard to gather children to listen to elders telling stories at home or community. One suggestion is to encourage various organizations both governmental and non-governmental to support storytelling events. Once these events have been recognized and accepted, people will turn their attention to folktales and storytelling. The First International Storytelling Festival 2013 at Mahasarakham University is an exemplary case. The festival was organized with the support of three major sections of the university, an International Organization, and a university abroad. Without the support and cooperation of these organizations, the festival would not be possible or would not be as successful. Let us all come together and join hands in making these storytelling festivals happen in every corner of the world so that we can all learn and share our cultural heritage in one of the most enjoyable ways.