

Conserving and developing folktales for promoting virtue and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region

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Abstract – *The findings indicate that the background of folktales of each research area comes from the application of Buddhist philosophy. One folktale told in many versions depends on who the narrator is. The centers of folktales are monasteries and they are always told by monks and the elderly. The main difficulties are a lack of folktale narrators, the majority of children and youths do not know folktales in depth, and many folktales are lost because they are not perpetuated by the present generation. As for the conservation and the development of folktales, all sectors in society should cooperate in these affairs, such as establishing folktale museums in the Isan region, integrating them in school curriculums of all levels and holding folktale telling competitions throughout the region. These folktales benefit the development of virtue and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region and other regions of Thailand.*

Keywords – *Conservation, development, folktales, Isan region.*

INTRODUCTION

Humans have known how to tell tales since the prehistoric age when many kinds of tales were told through oral narratives [1]. Telling tales is one of the oldest arts. It is an alternative way to communicate with other people, especially stories concerning adventure or exciting experiences of a family or an ethnic group [2]. Although the content of the tales of each ethnic group is different according to the differences of the geographic or physical surrounding area, the main objectives of the tales are the same: to entertain members of a family or a group at leisure and to use them as media for teaching religion, virtue and ethics to villagers. Almost all tales in the prehistoric age were perpetuated from generation to generation through oral narration and were not recorded in writing. The first written record concerning tale-narration was written on papyrus and found in Egypt. It was written that the son of King Cheope was a great king who constructed a lot of pyramids and entertained his father by telling tales from about 2,000-3,000 years before the time of Christ. The oldest Indian tale was called Baruhadakatha and was written by Gunalaya. It is assumed that this is the origin of many tales written about the 6th-7th Buddhist century. During those periods, letters were invented and many tales were recorded in writing instead of oral narration [3].

In Thailand, telling tales used to be a type of entertainment, giving people both recreation and ethical perspectives. They were told by an expert in the presence of villagers at important ceremonies or festivals in each village [4]. Originally, many tales were inherited from older generations. They were transmitted from their origins to other places and their details were adapted to the context of the new society. Each narrator would adapt some details of the original tales and tell them through a simple local dialect. This caused some of the original tales to develop local quirks and become independent folktales of the area [5]. Many folktales reflect social problems and suggest ways to solve them. Almost all narrators have their own individual narration style. They can narrate all types of folktales and persuade listeners to improve and become better people [6]. Folktales are part of national cultural heritage and originated from many sources, such as the collection of tales concerning the previous lives of the Lord Buddha or Jataka stories, tales written by learned men and tales told by the elderly [7].

The folktales told in Northeastern Thailand (the Isan region) emphasize religious beliefs, traditions, customs and the way of life of local people. Their narrative and vocabulary are simple and easy to understand for listeners. The tales are made accessible for locals but the main problem is that the majority of recorded

folktales are derived from palm-leaf inscriptions and they are written in ancient Isan language, so very few people can read and tell them to others. There is a lack of experts in this field and there has been a decline recently because there is a lack of narrators and a lack of interested listeners. The researchers thus chose to study about ways to conserve and develop folktales, in order to promote the virtue and ethics of children and youth in the Isan region of Thailand. This research may lead to discovery of ways to construct social solidarity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to investigate the background of folktales for promoting virtues and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region; to investigate the current situation and difficulties of the use of folktales to promote virtues and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region; and to investigate ways to conserve and develop folktales for promoting virtues and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a qualitative investigation. The research area was purposively selected as 1) Ban Kae Hua Hat School, Thanys Sub-District, Kamalasai District, Kalasin Province, 2) Noen Daeng Rat Prasit School, Lam Chi Sub-District, Khong Chai District, Kalasin Province, 3) Ban Phu Din School, Khok Kor Sub-District, Mueang District, Maha Sarakham Province, 4) Ban Khok Lam School, Borabue Sub-District, Borabue District, Maha Sarakham Province, 5) Ban Lao Kham School, Lao Kham Sub-District, Mueang District, Roi Et Province and 6) Thai Rat Witthaya 10 Chalerm Phra Keat School, Nong Waeng Khuang Sub-District, Si Som Det District, Roi Et Province. The research sample was also purposively selected and was made up of 30 key-informants, 60 casual informants and 30 general informants. Evidence was gathered from document analysis and field research. Data collection tools were observation, interviews and focus group discussions. The research period was one calendar year.

The research was conducted in five stages. The first stage was a documentary investigation period, during which the researchers searched dissertations and documents concerned with understanding and answering all things related to the research aims. These dissertations and documents were collected and categorized as a base of knowledge for this research. An observation form and an interview form were constructed, based on the information from these

foundations. The second stage of research was the determination of research instruments; the observation form and interview form were created during this stage. All forms were examined by experts and improved according to expert advice. The third stage was field study. After all appointments had been made, the researchers began to conduct the field study. The field study lasted 12 months. The fourth stage was the data validation and analysis stage. The data were examined and corrected using a triangulation technique. This technique was used to examine the relationship between situations and dates, situations and places and situations and people. When everything had been validated and analyzed, the researchers began to make a research report. The fifth and final stage was the presentation of results in the presence of a research committee. A descriptive analysis was presented through multimedia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of folktales told in the Isan region of Thailand are derived from palm-leaf inscriptions and written in ancient Isan language. Only a few monks and elders can read them, so these are the main groups of people who tell them to others in each community. These folktales are transmitted by oral narration. The temples of each village are centers of folktale narration. Monks usually use them as media for carrying the Lord Buddha's teachings to general Buddhists believers. These folktales are adapted to the social context of each village, so just one folktale may have many versions depending on the narrator, the location and the purpose. In summary, it can be said that the folktales told in the Isan region originate from the tales of the previous lives of the Lord Buddha, which are called Jataka Stories, as well as the tales told or written by ancient learned men, including the tales told by village elders. This is consistent with the research of Foster, who says that the process of enculturation for social members lasts from early childhood to young adulthood [8]. It is rather intensive during the early period of enculturation and declines when each person grows into adulthood and has strong confidence. Folktales in each community have their own development; one folktale may be told as many versions. This is consistent with the theories of Charles Darwin, Lewis Morgan and Edward Tylor [9, 10, 11]. These three academics suggested that there were many ways to develop culture, such as invention, discovery, borrowing, exchange and diffusion. Thus, folktales told in the Isan region of Thailand have

development in a way consistent with theories of cultural development.

Folktales are still used to promote virtues and ethics of children and youths by monks and teachers, so centers of folktale-telling are monasteries and schools. Globalization affects society and the economy. Nowadays, families tend to be nuclear, while extended families are reduced in accordance with the structural change of society and the economy. The roles of the elderly have also changed, so now older people rarely tell folktales to their family members as they did in the past. Similarly, children and youth tend to entertain themselves with the help of modern media, such as the Internet, cable television, digital television, DVD players and other electronic devices. Although both monasteries and schools played a role as centers that use folktales for promoting virtue and ethics of children and youth, the children and youth still use the Internet for searching for everything and parents still influence their children on matters of virtue and ethics because they are role-models. The main difficulties with using folktales to develop virtues and ethics of children and youths are a lack of skilled folktale narrators, a lack of in-depth, substantial folktale knowledge among the majority of children and youths, a lack of realization of the importance of folktales for society and the disappearance of many folktales because they are not inherited by the modern generations. This is consistent with the research of Pramuan Pimsen, who argues that, because of social and cultural changes pushing folktale telling into monasteries and schools, only monks, teachers and scholars appreciate the value of folktales [12]. They are only used by these groups as instruments for developing virtues and ethics of general people. Elsewhere, they are ignored. It is also consistent with the conclusions of Charubut Rueangsuwan who found that expert narrators are necessary for the conservation and inheritance of folktales [13]. These narrators must have great narrative and persuasive skills in this field.

There are many ways to conserve and develop folktales for promoting virtues and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region. In terms of conservation, all sectors of each community should cooperate to collect folktales and establish a folktale museum, which could also be used as a center of folktale-knowledge transmission. Although each monastery integrates folktale telling in Buddhist activities and each school integrates it into the curriculum, there needs to be a particular organization for controlling this task directly because the success of the integration for virtue and

ethics promotion among children and youths depends on the cooperation of all sectors. In terms of developing folktales for promoting virtue and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region, these folktales should be transformed into many varieties of media, such as printed media and electronic media, in order to be easy to use. Thus, folktale telling in the form of a series of story books, a series of DVDs or a series of television programs should be produced. The content of these media should cover all virtues and ethics necessary for instilling into children and youths, such as social norm observation, social unity, generosity, gratitude, discipline, honesty, kindness, gentleness and perseverance. Moreover, folktale-telling competitions should be held continuously in the Isan region in order to conserve this piece of local heritage for future generations. This is consistent with the conclusions of Pricha Uytrakun who said that the majority of Isan folktales contain material concerning perseverance, honesty, kindness, gentleness, gratitude, generosity, traditional observation, unity and religious beliefs in order to teach people about the appropriate ways of life.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the background of folktales of each research area comes from the application of Buddhist philosophy. One folktale told in many versions depends on who the narrator is. The centers of folktales are monasteries and they are always told by monks and the elderly. The main difficulties are a lack of folktale narrators, the majority of children and youths do not know folktales in depth, and many folktales are lost because they are not perpetuated by the present generation. As for the conservation and the development of folktales, all sectors in society should cooperate in these affairs, such as establishing folktale museums in the Isan region, integrating them in school curriculums of all levels and holding folktale telling competitions throughout the region. These folktales benefit the development of virtue and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region and other regions of Thailand. The ways to conserve and develop folktales to promote virtues and ethics of children and youths in the Isan region of Thailand in this research may be appropriate for related organizations. The success of the use of folktales for promoting virtues and ethics of children and youths depends on the cooperation of all sectors in each community, so systematic operation is necessary for this affair.

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