STORYTELLING, A MEANS TO REVITALIZE A DISAPPEARING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN NORTHEAST THAILAND (ISAN)

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ABSTRACT

Throughout much of northeast Thailand (Isan), Lao is the dominant local language. In areas near the Cambodian border Khmer is dominant. Suay is spoken in certain areas. There are pockets of Phutai speakers in the region. And various other dialects are dominant in places (Khorat) for instance. In the entire area of Isan, at least fifty dialects still exist. [1] Today, however, central and official Thai is rapidly becoming the dominant language throughout Isan. Villagers are embarrassed to speak their own language in front of more urbanized Thai. Children are taught not to speak in their own local dialects and are sometimes even punished for doing so in the schools. If this attitude exists among people of all levels, we are in danger of losing our diversity in languages and cultures. Thailand may become mono-cultured (language included) and whenever this culture is threatened, we may not have any culture that is considered our own at all. Our one language, central Thai, could easily be threatened as we adopt more technological advancement. This paper discusses a three-year research project, using storytelling to revitalize the local dialects and folktales. The successes, failures, and suggestions for future cultural challenges will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of northeast Thailand (Isan), Lao is the dominant local language. In areas near the Cambodian border Khmer is dominant. Suay is spoken in certain areas. There are pockets of Phutai speakers in the region. And various other dialects are dominant in places (Khorat) for instance. In the entire area of Isan, at least fifty dialects still exist. [2] Today, however, central and official Thai is rapidly becoming the dominant language throughout Isan. Villagers are

embarrassed to speak their own language in front of more urbanized Thai. Children are taught not to speak in their own local dialects and are sometimes even punished for doing so in the schools. If this attitude exists among people of all levels, we are in danger of losing our diversity in languages and cultures. Thailand may become mono-cultured (language included) and whenever this culture is threatened, we may not have any culture that is considered our own at all. Our one language, central Thai, could easily be threatened as we adopt more technological advancement. We can even notice among many Thai educators who speak Thai with 50% English terms in their discourse. However, the history of the threat went back to 1991. The researcher was engaged in a translation project funded by the Fulbright Scholar Program. The translation of the first folk epic, *Phadaeng Nang Ai*, into English [3] was aimed at getting attention from Thai people to see that their minority literature is in the language spoken by major power countries. Then the Thai would value their own literature more. At that time, the purpose of the work was just to publish and preserve the literature that is disappearing. And through the translation of the second book, *Phya Khankhaak*, [4] the researcher discovered that the language of her mother tongue, Lao, has been endangered. This text is an ancient fertility myth of the northeast and it is difficult to understand the language. Later, she understood that her first language, Lao, was never taught in school and she had never been taught in her own language. The language of instruction in schools at all level is central Thai. The only languages taught in school were official Thai and English. [5]

Upon her return from her Fulbright Scholar term in the United States in 1992, Dr. Wajuppa Tossa found that children did not speak and could not understand their dialects. In 1993, she conducted a small survey of the knowledge of Isan language and literature among the first grade children in Mahasarakham municipality. A series of survey was done at the demonstration school at the Teachers' College, a school run by the Mahasarakham Municipal Office, and the largest elementary school under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The result was frightening. More than 50% of these children did not understand the Isan local language. Less than 20% of the children could recognize names of Isan literature. Most of them cited Western fairy tales such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Cinderella' as Isan folk tales. Some even cited some television modem drama series as Isan folk tales. From the result of this survey, a great cultural loss became evident. Within the next twenty years, young adults from northeast Thailand would speak only central Thai. The beauty of these hundreds of dialects would be lost. Soon Isan people from urban areas would not be able to communicate with those from the rural areas.

Those incidents prompted the researcher to find ways to preserve and revitalize the use of local

languages and cultures. Storytelling was the answer as the researcher believes in its magic and power for both the listeners and the tellers. Thus, the work began with submitting copies of the grant proposal to seek funding to begin a project to preserve languages and cultures of various ethnic languages in Isan. Perhaps, later, scholars from other parts of Thailand could do the same for their local languages and cultures.

This paper discusses the three year research project to engender pride in local language and culture through storytelling. Children were tested on their knowledge of local dialects and folk literature. They were then exposed to storytelling demonstrations of local stories performed by university students. Teachers were given a short workshop in the use of storytelling in the classroom and encouraged to continue sharing local folktales with these children. They were asked to encourage the children to discover more stories from their families and share them in the classroom. In a return visit the following year, the children were tested once again on their knowledge of local dialects and folk literature.

In a further stage of the project, four activities became annual events--an annual storytelling camp leader workshop for grades 6 through 12 and university students, an annual summer storytelling camp for elementary school parents and children, an annual storytelling workshop for teachers, educators, and interested individuals nationwide, and an annual Tellabration, a celebration of storytelling around the world based on the U.S. National Storytelling Network model for children and adults. The successes, failures, and suggestions for future cultural challenges will be discussed.

Dr. Wajuppa Tossa's plan was to recruit interested university students in her university and train them to collect Isan folk tales from different resources--palm-leaf manuscripts, books, chronicles, and from interviews with the elder people. These students would be trained to be successful storytellers, and then were taken to the largest school in each province in northeast Thailand to tell stories to children in the local language spoken in each province. After class, the teachers were given a storytelling workshop so that they could help the children to tell stories. At that time, the children were asked to go back to their parents and grandparents to learn some stories that they knew. After some period of time, the researcher and her students went out to each of the same schools to hold a storytelling session told by children from that school. Small prizes were given to the storytellers for reinforcement. These children participating in the storytelling project could attend the summer storytelling camp for children and parents free of charge.

Search for Grants

Projects proposals were sent to many organizations, private and governmental, in and outside of Thailand. But we only gained support from the Fulbright Foundation, who sent us Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald, a children's literature specialist, librarian, folklore scholar, and professional storyteller, to train the university students to be successful storytellers. The James W. H. Thompson Foundation of Thailand gave stipends to our student-storytellers all through three years of the project. The project began in September 1995 and ended August 1998. Every summer, we organized a storytelling camp for children along with a workshop for interested scholars on storytelling techniques. After the project was completed, the summer storytelling camp was still carried on.

We trusted the project would be successful. First of all, storytelling is always enjoyable for people of all ages. The organizers and participants of the storytelling project were from the highest and most respected institution in Thailand. Because of their respect and admiration, teachers and children in elementary schools might feel that it was all right to speak the local language and become interested in reviving storytelling in their own dialects and in searching for stories that might have been lost or forgotten. With the success of the project, the language, literature, and rituals inherent in the use of the language would be maintained. Children could learn to speak, read, and write the mainstream language and literature while maintaining fluency in speaking their local dialects. The ultimate goal of this project is to try to push these local "dialects" into the educational system. Then all skills in the local "dialects" shall be taught in school. Children are expected ultimately to be bilingual or multilingual.

THE MAHASARAKHAM UNIVERSITY STORYTELLING PROJECT BEGINS

First Phase of the Storytelling Project

The storytelling project actually began in September 1995. The researcher recruited 20 students and arranged for the time to meet with them about three times a week during the September and October 1995. There were six graduate students and fourteen undergraduate students. In November, Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald, the Fulbright Scholar, arrived and began the training. Students were trained to be sensitive story collectors and storytellers. We met three times a week as a big group and smaller groups. We learned to tell stories in lively styles as a single teller, tandem telling, and a story theater. Stories that we learned were Thai

folktales from Dr. MacDonald's collection. [6] She told a story in English and I translated into Lao as if we were tandem telling the story. Then, we asked the students to retell the story in the language they felt most comfortable with. In most cases, the language was Lao.

One of our assignments to the students was for them to collect folktales from folktale collections and from interviewing storytellers from their communities. Then, they were to share their stories in class. I would translate the stories as they were being told for Dr. MacDonald who would then choose appropriate stories to make them tellable. Then she retold each story in English and I translated it in tandem format. The students then practiced telling the story in their own language. Dr. MacDonald herself also searched for Isan folktales from folktale collections at the Mahasarakham University's Library. She had one graduate student help her translate the stories. Then, she would tell each story after she had worked on it.

We learned to tell stories with little or no props. We used our three instruments, voices, facial expressions, and body movements. After two months of training, we took the students to tell stories in nearby schools. Our storytelling was by no means traditional, but most of our stories were. We made the telling lively and audience participatory. This kind of storytelling was new, so we could hold the children's attention and interest. Before we went out to target schools to tell stories, we held a storytelling conference. In this conference, our students had another chance to tell stories to adults. We had participants from all regions of the country and from Laos. It was so successful that we still carry on ties with these seminar participants. This became our annual storytelling event even after the project was over for a long time.

A Survey of Children's Attitudes and an Encouragement to Tell

After the summer and in the first semester of 1996, we prepared survey questions to find out the children's background on local dialects and folk literature. In November 1996, we traveled to twenty-two provincial city schools. At each school, we did three activities: we got the teachers in each school to give the survey forms to the children (We let all first grade children, 4,933 total, do the survey); we told stories to the first grade children and to the whole school assembly as well; and we gave a storytelling workshop to teachers after classes were over.

We believe that for a disappearing language and culture to be maintained and revitalized, everyone must take part. So we tried to get both parents and teachers to be involved, not just the

children. At the performance, we told three or four short folktales in tandem and one in story-theater formats. Then, we encouraged the children to collect stories from home to share with us in our next visit to the school. We also encouraged teachers to help us follow up by asking the children once everyone or two weeks what stories children had learned from home. If children would like to tell stories, then the teachers could help them rehearse. In this way, everyone around the children would be involved in the process of preserving Isan folk literature that might be forgotten. Otherwise, the children themselves might feel that these stories were important. If they liked the stories and the way we told in dialects, they might have better attitude towards local dialects and literature.

Even though we tried to get everyone involved in the process of preserving local languages and culture, our focus was on children. Thus, in our second visit to the schools, we asked the children to volunteer to tell their stories to us. We left the break period of about one year before we returned to the schools again to do the same activities plus listening to representative children tell their stories to us. We hoped that the children would choose to tell stories learned from home and tell them in local dialects. We were delighted to find 129 young storytellers among the 4,933. Among these children, 81.60% told folktales learned from home and 75.96% told stories in local dialects. Stories that the children told were quite unique such as the story of the *Golden Conch Shell* which was similar to the *Golden Turtle Prince*, not *Sangthong* in a Thai textbook. Some stories were quite tellable that we adapted from the children's telling such as *When Xiangmiang Is Outwitted, Three Animals (similar to Three Friends* by Phra Inta Kaweewong from Roi-et), and *The Stingy Bird (Nok Khee Thi)*. Thanks to these children who learned the stories from their communities.

We set up our hypotheses that after we told the children fun stories in local dialects and after we encouraged them to collect stories from their communities, the number of children who knew local dialects and literature would increase and their attitude towards local dialects and literature would improve also.

Analyzing the Data

Samples of our surveys came from four major language groups: dominantly Lao; dominantly Lao, *Yo*, *Phutai*, *Xo*, and *Saek*; dominantly Lao, *Khmer*, *Yoe*, and *Suay*; and dominantly Thai *Khorat*, Khmer, and some Lao. After the two visits, we gathered the data, analyzed, and compared the results of the two surveys. Our hypotheses were both right and wrong.

Results of the analysis of data for the knowledge of local dialects partly supported our hypotheses. For students from Group 1: Lao Language Group, the number of children who know and understand Lao increased significantly from 77.46% to 84.38%.

For Group 2: Lao, <u>Yo, Phutai</u>, Xo, and <u>Saek</u>, we discovered that two dialects Xo and <u>Saek</u> are dead among this group of children. None of the samples knew these dialects. For Lao, the number of children who knew and understood the language increased insignificantly from 69% to 70.75%. For Yo and *Phutai* which were quite little known, the numbers dropped insignificantly from 28.5% to 26% and 12.25% to 12%.

For Group 3: Lao, Khmer, <u>Yoe</u>, and <u>Suay</u>, the first survey indicated that 67% of the children knew and understood Lao; 24% knew and understood Khmer, no one knew and understood <u>Yoe</u> and <u>Suay</u>. The results of the second survey indicated that <u>Yoe</u> and <u>Suay</u> were known to the samples; 4% of the children knew and understood <u>Yoe</u> and <u>Suay</u>. The numbers of the children who knew Lao dropped to 52%" However, the number of the children who knew and understood Khmer increased to 36%.

For Group 4: Thai *Khorat*, Khmer, and some Lao, the results were mixed as well. The children who knew and understood Thai *Khorat* increased from 24% to 35%. The number of the children who knew and understood Khmer increased insignificantly from 27% to 27.5%, but the number of the children who knew and understood Lao decreased from 37.5% to 33.25%.

Discussion of Research Results

In sum, the results of the survey of the children's knowledge of local dialects were not what we had expected. Even after we had demonstrated to the children how much fun it was to tell stories in local dialects, the number of children who knew dialects did not increase as much as we had expected. In some cases, the number even dropped some insignificantly and some quite drastically. It was puzzling why the results should come out that way.

Looking back at the surveys, we found four factors that may be the causes of the decrease. First, the test may be too difficult for the children who had just begun studying for only three months. They might not have understood what "know Isan dialects" meant in the survey. They might have thought that knowing 3 - 5 words could justify for "know Isan dialects," when they were in the first grade. Then, when they were in the second grade, their reading skill should be better and "know Isan dialects" for them might have a clearer definition of being able to speak and tell stories in Isan dialects instead of in Thai with a mix of three or four words in Isan dialects. This

tells us that in the future, we might have to explain definitions of key concepts to both the teachers and children before giving out the test. Second, as the children had just begun studying, many of them might not be able to even read yet. In the first few schools that we did the survey, we gave the questions to the children to read and mark the answer sheets. When we examined them, we found that they were incomplete and we could use less the data than what we had expected. Later, we asked the teachers to read the questions to the children and had the children only mark the answer sheets. We were able to obtain the complete answer sheets as we had expected. Third, we resigned to the fact that we could not expect the children to learn local dialects that they did not have any occasion or chance to use in one year just after listening to our storytelling performance once. Other influences were more regular and stronger. In school, children were not allowed to speak local dialects. At home, they spoke Thai; as evidence in our survey, 54.53% of the children's families spoke Thai instead of local dialects. Another influential factor that hindered the children from speaking local dialects was television. Thai children nowadays spent a lot of time watching television. Thai was the only language used, let alone the fact that they wanted to imitate their idol stars and singers who always speak Thai, no matter where they come from. Finally, another factor that might have made us fail to convince the children to learn more of the local dialects could be that our own storytelling team also had limitations. We could not speak all dialects mentioned in the survey. We could only tell stories in Lao, Khmer, Khorat, Yo, and Phutai.

Even though the number of the children who knew local dialects did not increase significantly, we were quite pleased with their attitude toward local dialects. In the first survey, 76.50% of the children were proud to speak local dialects and in the second survey the number rose to 86.18%. 81.69% of those who could not speak local dialects wished they could in the first survey and 81.35% in the second survey. 75.66% of the children agreed that Thai people should be able to speak a dialect as well as the standard and official Thai. The number rose to 83.13% in the second survey. For the first survey, 53.61% of the children felt embarrassed speaking any local dialect, but after having more storytelling experiences, the number decreased to 51.50%. For the first survey, 38.41% of the children thought that Thai people should speak only one language—the standard and official Thai. But in the second visit, their attitude improved and the number of children with negative attitude dropped to 23.40%.

After examining data relating to dialects, we studied those relating to local literature or folktales. We were quite delighted that 45.76% of the children knew the 12 items listed in our first survey. After listening to our stories and being encouraged to learn more stories from home, the number of children that knew the 12 items listed rose to 54.24%. Findings of the children's

attitude towards local folktales, like that of the dialects, are most satisfactory. They proved our hypotheses accurate. For the first survey, 74.91 % of the children agreed that everyone should know at least one local folktale and the number rose significantly in the second survey to 84.13%. For the first survey, 85.36% of the children liked to ask their parents, grandparents, and elders to tell them stories. After the storytelling team from our project told the children stories, 95.07% of the children agreed with this statement. Before our visit, 90.77% of the children felt that stories could teach us moral lessons. After our visit, up to 97.53% agreed with this statement.

For those who did not have good opinions of local folktales and storytelling, their attitude improved after being exposed to our storytelling experience. From the first survey, 31.74 % of the children agreed that local folktales and storytelling were old-fashioned. But after hearing our stories, the number dropped quite significantly to 21.63%. Before our visit, 29.59% of the children thought that local folktales and storytelling were of no essence. But after more exposure to local folktales and storytelling from us, the number dropped significantly to 21.58%. Unlike the language issue, the folktales have always been in the children's lives. From our survey, 71.70% of the children still had storytelling at home by their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters. No one had ever forbidden them from listening or telling stories. Thus, it was quite appropriate that their knowledge and attitudes towards the folktales should improve.

However, if we do not encourage storytelling among adults and children, the art might disappear as well, as the age of mass media and advancement in technological information are upon us. We have tried to organize more storytelling events in and out of education settings so that people would be constantly excited about storytelling. Many activities relating to the preservation of languages and cultures have been carried out to strengthen our cultural identity. Each semester, a course on *Folktales and Storytelling* is offered and at least 5-20 universities students have been trained. Upon invitation, the committee members have gone to educational institutions and private organizations to give storytelling workshops and performances. Storytelling has been adapted as an effective language technique at university, elementary, and pre-school levels. We have encouraged the collection of folktales, folksongs, children's games, songs, and lullabies. The use of Thai tradition of paying homage to teachers, *wai khru*, has been performed before every performance. Finally, adapting folk epics for children's theater has been successful in getting both children and parents to be excited about local folktales and literature.

Three of the mentioned activities have become annual events at Mahasarakham University until

the year 2001. Each February for three years, we organized a nationwide storytelling workshop and conference for teachers and educators from lower and higher educational levels, and interested individuals. We attracted more than 50 participants each year. We had hoped that these participants would carry on the work of preserving local dialects and literature. So far, we keep in touch with these participants and had great reports from a majority of them on how they spread out our ideas of the preservation of local dialects and literature.

Each year for three years we organized storytelling camps for both parents and children in March or April. At least fifty pairs of parents and children attended the camps. Another activity that Dr. MacDonald helped introduce and set up for us was an annual event called "Tellabration," a celebration of storytelling around the world held around the third week of November based on the model from (United States) National Storytelling Network (NSN). We offered a short workshop, a storytelling demonstration by the members of the university storytelling troupe and internationally well-known storytellers that we could invite, and a storytelling contest. From the two contests in the festivals, we could get at least twenty young storytellers who were most enthusiastic to help us carry on the storytelling tradition and to collect and preserve these stories through adapting them for lively performances. These young people have become our "junior staff." They were active camp leaders for the 1998 summer storytelling camp and are eager to continue helping us with storytelling events. Again, we plan to continue with "Tellabration" when we are in town.

CONCLUSION

With mostly favorable statistical results of the research as well as the fruitful and soul-satisfying storytelling activities sprung from the mother project, I think we are on the right track to use storytelling as a means to revitalize the use of local dialects among the people. The results may not be clear in a short period of time, but if we are consistent and determined, we may reach our goal of making people see the significance of both local dialects and literature. Ultimately, we may be able to push both storytelling and local dialects into formal and respected courses in school at all levels. By getting people from all levels and from all walks of life involved in the preservation of our own cultures, we can be culturally strong and will be ready for any challenge to come. Scholars, educators, and policy makers need to evaluate, examine, and take actions in the preservation and revitalization of local cultural heritage before it is too late. Topics for further research are varied ranging from the collection of folktales told by traditional storytellers, adaptation of these folktales for performances for younger people, the use of folktales in the classrooms, how to involve young people in the process of cultural

preservation and revitalization, and so on. With the constant needs to preserve and revitalize local cultural heritage, the researcher is determined to continue to undertake all activities that have sprung from the original project as well as trying to carry on research projects, with or without any financial support.

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