

# The Jataka Stories and Laopuan Worldview

PRANEE WONGTHET  
*Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand*

It has often been questioned whether cultural accounts based on oral tradition are reliable or appropriate sources for historical or anthropological studies of Thai society. The main reason for such an argument is that the social and cultural development of the Thai society is much more complex than that of many groups lacking written languages. Such complexities are due to the fact that Thai society was originally a peasant society. It later developed a more complex political structure, social hierarchy, and urban-rural relationships as well as extensive connections with foreign countries. It also has its own script to record its history. Because of the complicated and differing cultural patterns of Thai society, it is quite difficult to apply theories or assumptions about folk narratives of Western anthropologists or folklorists.

Thai historians who are currently engaged in inquiring into the historical basis of the oral tradition can be divided into two groups. The first group of historians are those who see only a limited amount of cultural values reflected in the oral tradition or reject the idea completely. The second group, on the other hand, treats the data or cultural accounts transmitted through the oral tradition as historical or cultural facts, without being aware of their limitation and without taking the time, place, and the informants into consideration.

This article aims at presenting the oral tradition as a cultural source of information for understanding the values, the cultural traditions, i.e., worldview, and ideas of a group of people, the Laopuan. It is hoped that the present analysis will provide understanding of the past as well as the current Laopuan cultural traditions. The analysis is

based on fieldwork conducted among the Laopuans in eastern Thailand. It does not rely on any particular theory, nor does it intend to put an end to the argument between historians of the above two different schools of thought.

Fieldwork was carried out during 1979–1980 in three villages in Kok Peep District, Prachinburi (WONGTHET 1980) Ban Muangkhao, Ban Tonbodi and, Bon Dan. The aim of the fieldwork was to collect from the villagers their oral tradition. The three villages were settled about one hundred and fifty years ago. They share certain inherited cultural aspects even though the villagers belong to four different ethnic groups: Thais, Chinese, Cambodians, and Laotians. These peoples came from various places at different periods, from various towns in Laos, namely Muang Khumked, Khummuan, Laopuan, Laokhao, Vientian, Luangprabang, Viengkhum, and Chumpasak.

Elderly Laopuans recounted that Laotian prisoners of war at first settled in the forest for fear of being plundered by the Thais. Each of the Laotian villages was established with a temple in the middle of the village. The Laotians found that they could not get along well with the Thais because the latter tended to look down upon them. Though these Laotians, like most of the Cambodians, had knowledge of black magic, they dared not practice it, for they realized that as captives they had a low status. The Laotian villages, for instance Ban Song, Tharnpoed, Huasung, Khokkwang, Ban Dan and Ban Muangkhao were all scattered within a forest. Roads to these villages were constructed only within the last thirty years. Mixed marriages between the Thais and the Laopuans only began to occur about fifty years ago.

As for other ethnic groups, the Thai Korat were moved from Korat by Praya Bodindeja, and the Cambodians from southeastern Thailand by Praya Abhaibhubase. The Chinese population comprised the Hakka Chinese, the Teachew and the Hainamese (VALLIBHOTAMA 1971). The Chinese had no conflicts with other groups and spoke the language of the people they came into contact with.

The people of these various ethnic groups of Kokpeep District share a belief in a sacred bodi tree, known as the Srimahabodi. The seed of this tree was brought over from Buddhakhaya. Sacred tales, myths, and songs accompanying the folk dance during the Bune Bungfai or rocket procession were composed and recited widely to tell the history of this sacred tree (Suchit WONGTHET 1968).

Villagers believe that, in the old days, on a night of the full moon, the sound of the Pinpat orchestra could be heard from under the tree. Its leaves also used to be so large that they could be used as food wrap-

pers. When any villager fell sick, he could recover if he paid homage to the leaves or mixed them in his drinking water. When any bad deed was committed a branch of the sacred tree would break off, pointing into the direction of the wrong-doer. The deity of the bodi tree protects and brings happiness to all villagers.

The belief in the sacredness of the bodi tree led to the Temple of the Bodi Tree being constructed and becoming the center of many cultural and merit-making activities as well as a symbol of the village. In the fifth lunar month, the villagers gather to pay respect to the tree. They light rockets as homage and ask for the rain to fall at the right time for their rice cultivation. The temple is one of the most important cultural landmarks of the eastern region.

Tales about the bodi tree and its sacredness render unity to members of the different ethnic groups. They hold meetings and cooperate with each other to organize cultural activities, through various elements of culture are exchanged, transmitted, and interracial marriages come about. Yet, each ethnic group still lives in the village designated by the Thai authorities; for example, the Thais reside in Ban Tonbodi and Ban Dan whereas the Laopuans live in Ban Muangkha.

An important cultural issue on ethnic groups in this region was raised by Srisakra VALLIBHOTAMA (1986). VALLIBHOTAMA said that despite cultural exchanges among the Chinese, the Thais and the Laotians (all of whom are Buddhists) and the fact that the Chinese are very active in the economic and communication developments of the area, the Laotians play the most important role in cultural developments. They hold firmly to their beliefs, customs, and traditions. VALLIBHOTAMA also attributed the dominance of Laotian culture to the Bune Bungfai (the rocket festival) and the popularity of Jataka stories (Buddha's birth stories). These stories are used by the villagers to explain historical and geographical aspects of the community. It can be said that the Laotians attachment to Jataka stories (stronger than that of the Thais), becomes an important mark of Laotian ethnic identity.

One of the Jataka stories widely known in Srimahabodi District is the story of Pra Mahosotha or Srimohosotha. It has been narrated as follows:

Pra Mahosotha was a ruler of Muang Srimohosotha, situated in the area now known as Ban Khokwat. Once he sent his elders to Muang khokkwang to ask for the hand of Nang Amornthevi (known by some villagers as Nang Maliwan or Nang Malee-chen, the heroine in the folktale, "Karakate"). The lady agreed to

marry Pra Mahosotha on the condition that he construct a road from Muang Srimohosotha to join a road she would build from her town. The construction of the road had to be finished by the rise of the morning star. But, before the road was completed, Nang Amornthevi played a trick on Pra Mahosotha by hanging a red light on the treetop, luring him into thinking that the morning star had already come up in the sky. Pra Mahosotha left the road unfinished. Being upset by the whole situation, he threw away all the sweets used as the dowry into a pond.

People nowadays still believe that all the above incidents occurred in the area around the bodi tree. This Jataka story therefore explains the origins of many important places. For instance, in an ancient town in Ban khokwat, known as Muang Mahosotha, there exists road named Pra Mohosotha Road, leading from the north eastern side of the town, called Ban Huasa, to Ban Kosmore. This road is believed to have been built at the time of Pra Mohosotha and Nang Amornthevi. A small pond in the middle of a field in Ban Kosmore is known as Nong Khanmaag (the Pond of the Dowry). The place where the dowry procession stopped is called Ban Hua Sa. The term "sa kun" in the Laopuan dialect means "to cancel."

Many other Jataka stories are popular and continue to be narrated among villagers, especially Pra Rot Meri (or the Twelve Ladies), Sung-silpachai, and so on. Some of these stories have been expanded with explanations attached to the story or with episodes invented by the villages to explain puzzling incidents or geographic features in the community. To the villagers, these sacred stories really happened a long time ago.

The question is, why does the Jataka story-telling tradition persist among the Laotians and appear to have more meaning to the Laotian lifeways and customs than to those of Thais, although both are Buddhists?

Understanding of the Jataka story-telling activity will help us understand the world-view, personality, and cultural values of the Laotians, an ethnic minority group in Thai society. Jataka stories have to be viewed as sacred stories or myths in Buddhism, important to the life and the mind of the Laotians. Along with the traditional belief in the worship of Phya Than, their mythical ancestor, Jataka stories helped the Laotians to achieve new awareness and hope in a new society, a society in which they had to accept the status of "captives" and adapt themselves to the Thai and the Cambodian cultures. Jataka stories have been a means of communicating beliefs; they are a symbol, a

universal language for communicating their ideas to other people of the new environment.

To understand the meaning and role of Jataka stories in the life of the Laotians, particularly the Laopuans in Srimahabodi District and Manomsarakam District, Chachengsao, it is crucial to consider the factors that played important roles in the transmission of tales among them. The first factor lies in the believed sacredness of the transmission of the Jataka stories which has become a part of the Laotian way of life. The other factor is the Laotian awareness of being an ethnic minority group in Thai society. In order to understand the second factor, it is important to look at the cultural, historical and political relations between Thailand and Laos as they existed in the past.

#### RECITATION OF THE JATAKA STORIES

It was a Laotian custom that Buddhist monks, as a method of delivering sermons, recited Jataka stories to villagers rather than directly preaching moral lessons. During the Buddhist Lent, sermons were given daily and Buddhist monks would recite Jataka stories to suit the occasion and religious activity. These stories had to be easy to understand and capable of holding the villagers' interest. To the Jataka stories were added moral lessons that the villagers could understand, accept, and thence apply to their lives.

As the monks were Jataka story-tellers, these stories were considered sacred and true by the villagers, who listened to their recitations with respect and faith, taking also the Scriptures as something holy. Ethics from Jataka stories were thus assimilated in the mind of the Laotians since their childhood.

#### JATAKA STORIES FOR THE CREMATION CEREMONY

Whenever death occurred in home, after a religious rite was performed, it was a custom to have Jataka stories recited nightly for the deceased. This kind of custom was also extensively practiced by the Laotians in the north-eastern part of Thailand (PUNNOTOK 1979). The stories were chanted to help lessen the sorrow of the deceased's family and friends who attended the ceremony.

The chanting of stories as a part of the cremation ceremony became a form of entertainment for all villagers. The host would choose a story-teller who had a good voice to provide entertainment for the guests and to prevent them from falling asleep during the ceremony. The host considered the chanting of Jataka stories as being also a merit-making activity. The villagers, both young and old, could be found at these story-chanting events, suggesting that entertainment and merit-

making were inseparable in the Laotians' way of life and that there was no generation gap in the Laotian community in the old days.

#### JATAKA STORIES DURING WOMEN'S CONFINEMENT AFTER CHILDBIRTH

After a Laopuan woman gave birth to a child she had to be in confinement for several days. During this period, her husband would read stories or have someone read them to her. The confinement period lasted thirty days or more for the delivery of the first child. The custom showed a husband's concern about his wife's well being since she had to stay at home, lie near an open fire, and abstain from many kinds of food. The reading, or sometimes the chanting of Jataka stories would entertain and at the same time convey moral lessons to the wife. Other people might also join the event. Nowadays with the advancement in modern medicine, the practice of women's confinement after child delivery and story reading are no longer observed in Laopuan villages.

Like the Thai, the Laopuans believed in the soul stuff called *kwan*. The telling of Jataka stories was formerly a part of various *kwan* ceremonies, such as the *kwan* celebration of a novice and of the couples at a wedding. The stories were also narrated in religious ceremonies of the "Twelve Months," a northeastern Thai religious tradition.

The Jataka story-telling custom of the Laotians was a continual education process, emphasizing every important step in the Laotian way of life. It also inculcated cultural values and Buddhist worldview in the mind of the Laotians who tried to link the sacred world during the time of Lord Buddha with the present world by frequently making merit and performing religious ceremonies. From the Laotians' viewpoint, Jataka stories are therefore not meant simply as entertainment or a means of killing time, but they present the world of truth and certainty, completely the opposite of the world of troubles and uncertainties the Laotians have to face during their present life.

#### JATAKA STORIES: OLD SYMBOLS IN A NEW WORLD

The fact that the Laotians are a minority in Thailand, forcibly moved from their native land after the war between Thailand and Chao Anuwongse of Vientian in 1835, greatly affected the feelings of the Laotians as a whole. Moreover, the historical fact that the Laotian captives were under close surveillance of the Thai authorities and their basic freedom restricted promoted unity among Laotian residents in Thailand. They all shared the mutual concern of preserving their customs, cultural events, and beliefs, which are the cultural heritage of their

ancestors.

As for the Laopuan's arrival in Thailand, the group consisted of royalty and noblemen, as well as ordinary citizens of various occupations. The members of the would be granted authority from the Thai government to govern other Laopuan citizens. Some married members of the Thai royalty, so they easily blended into the Thai social system. Some were also given titles of nobility in return for their loyalty to the Thai government.

Among ordinary citizens and slaves, however, it was the Laotian monks who were looked to as spiritual leaders. These monks brought with them books of Jataka stories which were copied and extensively recited. Their number rapidly increased until there were not enough bookcases to hold all the books. Many of them had to be kept under the base of Buddha statues in Wat Kokmon (Pra Boonchuay Buasong-sri, personal communication). For Laotian captives, the monks became the most important unifying force. There is also evidence that the Laopuan monks were religiously strict and held important monastic ranks in the Panomsarakam District (SARIKBHUTI 1987, 6).

The Laopuan villages evidently differ from the Thai villages of the same region in that Laopuan villagers are more dedicated to merit-making, building temples in their villages, and frequently attending religious ceremonies at the temples. Even the younger generations take it as their duty to make merit at the temples the same way their ancestors had done in the past. This made the Laopuan community a close-knit community. The villagers work closely together on various communal activities from the offering of saffron robes to monks to the establishment of various community organizations.

It is undeniable that during the Laopuans' early settlement in Thailand, Laopuans were maltreated by the Thais who looked down upon them as captives. The reactions and feelings of the Laopuans towards these maltreatments were expressed in their traditional lullabies called the Kumphaya Lullabies (Pranee WONGTHET 1982) as well as in the words of the elders. The Laopuans felt that they had to be modest, patient, and had to hold onto their Laopuan culture in order to have an identity of their own in the new land. What followed were new roles accorded to their traditional Jataka stories. For them, the stories helped to forge Laopuan worldview as a spiritual refuge for survival in the new country. They also enabled the Laopuans to be able to feel confident and proud of their own ethical values. The Jataka stories are thus, for the Laopuans, a valuable spiritual linkage between the past in Laos and the present in Thailand.

## JATAKA STORIES IN LAOTIAN LIFE

Faith in Buddhism together with Laotian traditional beliefs can be traced in the lives of all Laotians, from the king to ordinary citizens. With Buddhist monks as educators of all social classes, Buddhist principles and values were transmitted. As stated in a Laotian chronicle, Buddhism has played an active role in prescribing rules for Laotian society. These rules were prescribed in the form of social conventions or legal regulations. The Dhamma or the teaching of Lord Buddha and the rules of monastic behavior were adapted to governmental, administrative, and judiciary systems. During legal trials, certain Jataka stories or rules of monastic behavior were referred to, and at times monks were invited to voice their opinions on the right and the wrong at the trial (DHAMAWAT no date, 88).

Buddhism also plays a role in formulating procedures to be followed in the Laotian traditional Twelve Month Rituals and the Fourteen Rules. Both emphasize appropriate behavior toward monks, marked by respect and politeness. Merit should also be made throughout the year and sermons should be attended. And attending Buddhist sermons leads to listening to Jataka stories, with set rules to be followed. The sacredness of the stories becomes so deep-rooted in the Laotian belief system that they are taken 'to explain not only different features in the community, but have also been referred to in the literature and various art forms of this region of Thailand. It is here suggested that the symbol of Laotian identity and the most important Laotian intellectual expressions lie in the Jataka stories.

Laotian cultural values, reflected in the Jataka stories, cover diverse areas, from the relationships between man and man, man and nature, man and supernaturalness, the cycle of life, the effects of good and bad deeds, heaven and hell, to the nature of social hierarchy. These influence the behavior and worldview of the listeners and cause them to be aware of differences, be it in the differing statuses as a subordinate or as a superior, a person with blessings and success, or a person who suffers through his own misdeeds.

Faith in Jataka stories also shapes Laotian personality. The Laotians are modest, docile, peaceful, patient, hard-working and stoic. These qualities have been clearly explained in the Jataka stories, as Lord Buddha's qualities and the ideal he strives for before achieving enlightenment.

As all other living beings, Lord Buddha faced the everlasting cycle of life and death, mishappenings, and sufferings. It was through the accumulation of good deeds in his ten reincarnations that Lord Buddha achieved *nirvāṇa*.

Compared to the sufferings of Lord Buddha in the Jataka stories, the suffering and difficulties the Laotians encountered as prisoners of war or as an ethnic minority are therefore explainable, bearable, and acceptable. For those who understand the teaching of Lord Buddha, suffering can be endless and is a part of every man's life. Merit-making can alleviate sufferings, attending sermons can assist to bring the peace of mind and enable a suffering soul to endure the reality of life.

Jataka stories, like Pra Mohosotha or Pra Rotmeri, become truthful accounts, historically meaningful and sacred to the Laotians. They can be explained by evidences found in this world around them, such as the site of an ancient city, the 'Twelve Ladies' Cave, and Nong Kanmaag. To the villagers, unexplainable accounts cannot be truthful accounts. They cherish what they believe to be the true, respected, and sacred narratives, particularly those transmitted by their venerated monks.

The time dimension, from the Laotian villagers' viewpoint, is not set on any scientifically provable time, but on the consequences of the cycle of karma. To use Jataka stories to explain the Laotians' new society is like transferring the world of their ancestors from their native land to the new place. As a result, the linkage between the past and the present is accomplished. This connection or linkage has to happen to make it possible for the new land to become meaningful for them.

To try to understand the values of Jataka stories from the Laotians point of view, particularly that of Laopuans, is to try to understand history, religion, and beliefs from the native's point of view. Place names, according to the villagers' narratives, are tied to Jataka stories, which in turn become the history of such places and the history of the community of the narrator. It can be stated that these stories show the imaginative power of the villagers who do not shun not from mixing the dream world with the real world. They reflect the villagers' attitudes towards their own surroundings.

The above data derived from the oral tradition can be very valuable to historians if they analyze and interpret it as carefully as they do other historical sources.

Recognizing the importance of the past is an important step. The Laotians' ties with their race and their past prove that, as a minority in Thai society, they have used Jataka stories as a unifying force and as a source of spiritual strength from which they derive patience and tolerance towards the sufferings and conflicts they encounter in the new society. Only through achieving this can the Laotian culture stand

side by side with, or influence, its neighboring cultures.

The cultural value of Laotian society, emphasizing the importance of Buddhist ideology as a basis for developing peaceful co-existence may, in the future, give way to culture change that turns Laotian culture into a materialistic culture that stresses competition in place of cohesion. When that time arrives, all sacred stories may be viewed as worthless, totally imaginative fantasies or as lies. Then they will become simply relics of the past.

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