

# ภาคภาษาอังกฤษ



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# An analysis of figurative language in the Isan Mahachat Sung-Sermon (Thet Laeh)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The sermon text can be regarded as a literary text that is comprised of distinct compositional form, meticulously selected diction and unique thematic content. The core essence of the Vessantara Jataka, known as Mahachat Sermon and used in thet laeh or sung-sermon form, lies in revealing the selfless character of the bodhisattva – the epitome of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice. This sermon is deployed by practitioner monks as a tool for stimulating the mind of lay devotees to listen to the story with devotional attentiveness and then apply its moral values in day to day life. In order to delineate the story well and render the narration effective, practitioner monks have played a major role in devising different techniques, one of which is using figures of speech. From a close textual and thematic analysis of the text *Phimpha Laeh Mahachat 13 Kantha (Samnuan Isan)* composed in the Isan language by the highly acclaimed sung-sermon practitioner monk, Venerable Phrakhru Sutasarapimol (Phramaha Phimpha Dhammadino), it has been found that figures of speech are profusely used in the narration of the entire story. In this paper we examine them by citing examples from the original text in English translation. All the figures of speech that are used have a reinforcing effect on the narration of the story. Providing emphasis, freshness of expression, vividness and conceptual clarity, the use of figures of speech has rendered great vitality to the story and has positively affected the proliferation, preservation and continuation of the tradition of the Mahachat sermon as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of the research project “A critical study of the Mahachat Sung-sermon from Isan”. The paper in its present simplified version is used as recommended reading for the undergraduate course on Introduction to Literature.

## INTRODUCTION

The sermon text can be regarded as a literary text that comprises such pure literary elements as compositional form, art of using language and content. Here we shall analyse the composite literary elements in the Isan version of Vessantara Jataka<sup>2</sup> known as Mahachat Sermon as used in *thet laeh*<sup>3</sup> or sung-sermon form. The analysis will focus on the different figures of speech used in the text. The Isan Mahachat Sermon has been composed by many sung-sermon practitioner monks, both in the lyric and prosaic forms. We have used the text “Phimpha Laeh Mahachat 13 Kantha (Isan version)” พิมพา แหล่มหาชาติ ๑๓ กัณฑ์ (สำนวนอีสาน)<sup>4</sup>, which is in the lyric form, for analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> Of the 550 Buddhist stories (Jatakas) illustrating the previous lives of the Buddha, the Vessantara Jataka known as Mahachat in Thai (meaning Great Birth) is the most popular in Thailand and has since long been delineated in both poetry and pictorial arts. In the Mahachat sermon, the core action is Prince Vessantara’s perfection of the meritorious act of charity or dana, which began with his generous act of donating the magical rain-giving white elephant to the drought-stricken denizens of the city of Kalinga, an act that outraged his own subjects and resulted in his banishment from the kingdom by his father, King Sanjaya. His exile expedited the next phase of generous acts that unrolled initially with whole-hearted donation of all his earthly and palatial belongings to suppliants from every stratum of society and eventually culminated with the giving away of his two little beloved children to the glutton Brahmin Chuchok and his wife to the deity Indra, disguised as a human. This particular Jataka tale which represents the penultimate birth of the Buddha as the Bodhisattva, before being finally born as Gotama Buddha, is extremely popular all throughout Thailand. In Isan, or North-east Thailand monks who have a high ranging voice train themselves to delineate the entire story (in 13 sections) in a unique recital style infused with distinct rhythms. As performer-narrators, sung-sermon practitioner monks follow the story along each of the thirteen sections known as kantha that totals to one thousand verses or katha expanding over time and space.

<sup>3</sup> Thet Laeh is a form of applied sermon in which some sort of rhythm is used during actual delivering of the sermon and so in English we have named it ‘sung-sermon’ in order to distinguish it from other sermons that are delivered mostly in a non-rhythmic recital form. Details of the origin of Thet Laeh can be found in the research monograph “A critical study of the Buddhist Sung-sermon from Isan” by the present writer.

<sup>4</sup> Dhammadino, Phimpha. (2005). *Phimpha Laeh Mahachat 13 Kantha (Isan version)* พิมพา แหล่มหาชาติ ๑๓ กัณฑ์ (สำนวนอีสาน), Khonkaen: Klangnanatham Company, Ltd.

Figure of speech is the use of a word that diverges from its normal meaning, or phrase with a specialized meaning not based on the literal meaning of the words in it. Figures of speech often provide emphasis, freshness of expression, or clarity. Many different types of figures of speech, both of the *tropes* type i.e. related to general meaning of words such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole, paradox, proverb, didactic interpolation, irony, symbol, imagery, foreshadowing, satire, and pathos; and *schemes* type i.e. related to form or shape such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, and onomatopoeia, are found in the text. We shall examine each of these in brief citing examples from the original text in translation.<sup>5</sup> The English translation is aimed at facilitating easy comprehension; however, no attempt is being made to present the translation in rhyme form. Each line of verse in the original Isan text contains nine or eleven syllables or words – four, five or six words in the first halfline (hemistich) and five or six words in the second half-line. The half lines on the page are written with space in between, so is the spacing in the translated version although the actual number of syllables could not be maintained in exactitude since Isan and English are structurally very different.

## SIMILE

In a simile a comparison between two distinctly different things is indicated by the word “like” or “as”. There are numerous similes in the text most of which are used to depict the feminine beauty as personified in the character of Phusati, the celestial consort of the deity Indra, who upon reaching the end of her meritorious deeds, descends to the earthly realm to be born as the mother of the Boddhisatva Vessantara, the future Buddha. The similes are associated with the delineation of sensuousness

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<sup>5</sup> Although a monosyllabic language, the acoustic tonal beauty of Isan is aesthetically well expressed during an actual rhythmic recital session of the Mahachat sermon by any expert sung-sermon practitioner monk. I regret my inability to capture the beauty of the language in my translation. It will require years of dedicated effort and I have miles and miles to traverse before I could reach that goal.

and human physical perfections which is believed to have roots in *kammic* perfection. The newborn baby of Pusati inherits her physical perfection as depicted in one of the quotes below. It is to be noted that the use of similes stirs the imagination and thus helps in creating beautiful images in the mind of the reader or listener, but the most important point is that the similes help bring forth a contrastive picture, for despite all her grace and beauty a celestial maiden had to face the consequence of her volitional deeds and no devine intervention could prevent or change the course of her actions. All her consort could do was to endow her with the ten devine blessings. When one realizes this point one would have no desire to lavish in the sensuality expressed through the similes and would rather commiserate with any folly, whether human or divine, that can bring an end to good *kammic* existence. Below are a few examples from section one and two of the text.

The second blessing May she possess superb beauty **her eyeballs dark blue**  
**Like the eye of the deer** the cornea of her eyes never be turbid  
*(Sec. I. lines 39-40, p. 6)*

Third blessing Let her **eyebrows be arched** just **like the bow** *(Sec. I. line 43, p. 6)*  
 Seventh blessing May her **breasts be splendid** **perpetually like a flower in bud**  
*(Sec. I. line 59, p. 7)*

Eight blessing Her **coiffure black and neat like the wings of carpenter bee**  
*(Sec. I. line 63, p. 7)*

Superb child **pretty as though painted**  
**Spotless beauty** bore no mark of dirt **as if moulded clean in an oven**  
**Hair pitch black resembling the spirogyra** possessor of great merits  
*(Sec. II. lines 24-26, p. 13)*

## METAPHOR

In a metaphor a word which in standard (or literal) usage denotes one kind of thing, quality, or action is applied to another, in the form of a statement of identity instead of comparison. Most metaphors in the text are associated with the depiction of parental, filial as well as spousal relationship. A few metaphors are also used to

depict the upheavals of life in the context of which existence is stated as the ocean (of suffering).

The two children are **the eyes and the heart** (*Sec. XII. lines 34, p. 119*)

**Two little gems** mother has come where thou both are (*Sec. IX. lines 31, p. 83*)

Green, so green is the cotton leaf dead in the midst of the forest

O' **the moon, the moon up in the sky so distant is my beloved from me**

(*Sec. IX. Part II lines 42-43, p. 94*)

Make good deeds until tired next life would assist to cross over **the ocean** (*Sec. II. lines 40, p. 14*)

## HYPERBOLE

The figure of speech called hyperbole (Greek for “overshooting”) is bold overstatement, or extravagant exaggeration of fact, used either for serious or comic effect. In the Mahachat sermon text, hyperbole is used for serious and not comic effect, especially to draw attention to the act of merit-accumulation that involves diligent effort over a vast stretch of time. Similar to the implied meaning of the English proverb “Rome was not built in a day”, merits cannot be accrued without consistency and lack of effort. There is no short-cut, no play of any unseen force or luck, no miraculous way leading to the accumulation of merits. Merits need to be built up consistently, continuously and with diligence as the life of the Bodhisattva illustrates and as vividly depicted in the following instance of hyperbole.

People surrounded	swarmed in to view the newborn
Appropriate are the <b>merits accumulated</b>	<b>a thousand eons of time span</b>
Reckoned <b>a merit treasury</b>	<b>enormous and bountiful</b>
Make good deeds until <b>fully tired</b>	next life would assist to cross over <b>the ocean</b>
<b>Fulfill to the utmost</b>	build up <b>tremendous power</b> ( <i>Sec. II. lines 37-41, p. 13</i> )

## PARADOX

Paradox is the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory ideas to point out some underlying truths. While through the use of hyperbole the significance of the act of accumulation of merit is highlighted, the use of paradox throws light on the oppositional

force of evil action as well as other paradoxical truths like the truth of ‘being’ which is embedded in suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), complexities, death and decay and the truth of ‘truth’ that can be misconstrued. The Newtonian Law – every action has an opposite and **equal** reaction – may not hold true in the sphere of Buddhist *Law of Kamma* as the first of the following instance of paradox suggests.

This is it accrue goodness                      **more than a hundred thousand times**  
**An evil action done just once can destroy all goodness** (*Sec. II. lines 73-74, p. 16*)

Why this world has such difference in thinking  
 As is said    **sees the evil as good**  
 Different mind different opinion differ in hundred thousand ways (*Sec. II. lines 78-80, p. 16*)

**Green, so green** is the cotton leaf **dead** in the midst of the forest (*Sec. IX. Part II lines 42-43, p. 94*)

**Flee from the tiger to land at the crocodile’s jaw** fortune or misfortune damn it  
 When the dog is chased to the **cul-de-sac** fears it not to confront in self-defense  
 (*Sec. VII. lines 28-29, p. 58-59*)

## PROVERB

A proverb is a succinct or pithy expression of what is commonly observed and believed to be true. Proverbs are interspersed all throughout the text. Most proverbs are centered upon the concept of *Kamma* and the three characteristics of existence (*tilakhana*) that Buddhism emphasizes, namely, impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anatta*).

This is it accrue goodness                      more than a hundred thousand times  
 An evil action done just once                can destroy all goodness (*Sec. II. lines 73-74, p. 16*)

Everything depends on individual action O’ dear acted upon differently (*Sec. II. line 98, p. 17*)

All actions in this life                      encountered through and through from the start  
 Every home                                      doth receive whether in slow pace or variance  
 The wise    have said so –  
 Whosoever is born                            beget senility, pain and death  
 Be it man or woman                        each will come upon his or her portion of kamma all the same  
 (*Sec. III. lines 49-52, p. 24*)

The results of our actions that have reached us will come to an end soon  
(*Sec. VIII. lines 189, p. 73*)

Accidentally encounter the common condition of the world  
Happiness and sorrow comes in tandem just think of it (*Sec. XII. lines 27-28, p. 119*)

## DIDACTIC INTERPOLATION

Closely related to proverbs are numerous didactic interpolations interspersed throughout the Mahachat sermon text. The reason why we have categorized proverbs and didactic interpolations separately is that proverbs hold universal truths the same as didactic interpolation, but there is no direct emphasis on the practice of these truths. Whereas in didactic interpolations this emphasis is obvious and the Mahachat sung-sermon practitioner monks would devote enough time in the course of delivering the sermon to clarify and repetitiously stress them so as to inspire and encourage the laity to put into real practice in life. The repeated words and phrases in the original Isan version are maintained in our translation below.

All listeners, brethren dear	father and mother reflect upon this
Consider deeply about charity	all generous deeds you have done
Did you gain mental benefits from them	I welcome you to introspect it
Have your meritorious acts made you happy	smile and happy always
Observe it see it	when you donate and distribute
Your mind becomes delightful	beget felicity through and through
Whenever you donate	it is a great benefit
Meritorious action is reckoned thus	welcome you to continue the effort
Accumulate merit gradually	little by little it will increase
When you die this shall be your asset	gain great merits
Everyone has to die	nobody can live forever
All beings in the vast world	none can escape from death
But when you transmigrate	to another realm
Everything would depend on your action	good and bad all depends on your action solely
Whoever has done good deeds	has goodness accumulated
When dead these actions will lead to heaven	ascend to heaven and reside there
Who ever has done evil deeds	these actions will let you
Fall into hell	full of suffering and lamentation
All virtuous people	men and women engage in generous action

Accumulate morality and generosity	the reward you gain is certain
Accrue good deeds there would be no suffering	the world will extol in your praise
Welcome you all do good	people will admire you
Deviate from all evil actions	it will reduce your value
Make you devoid of value in yourself	only good and evil exist in this world
All other animals	like herds of cattle
And herds	of elephants
All decay and decompose	but their skin tusks bones
Still have some value	can be sold and bought
When people die all's over	just cremate the body
Nothing remains	that could be sold or bought
Like the poetry that has taught	Thai poet has ever composed
I leave this to you all laity	for you to consider and reflect upon–
“Bull, oxen, buffalo, elephant	that are old and unworthy of any work
Their tusks, horns	still bear importance and value in body
But when humans die	the whole body is valueless
Only good and evil actions persist	to adorn the world.”
The entire human populace	when dead and decomposed
Goodness and evil still exist	permanent in essence
Offer this message to each of you	read and investigate this poetic truth
	<i>(Sec. I. lines 80-118, pp. 8-10)</i>
Do good leaving behind its trace	regardless of whether praised or not
Heaping up of evil	if praised as good pay no heed to it
	<i>(Sec. II. lines 83-84, p. 16)</i>
Endure, just endure until the end	O' young beauty don't gripe
Veridically none can escape	one's own volitional action
	<i>(Sec. IV. lines 50-51, p. 32)</i>
Do no bad action	all kinds of evil
Let only the good manifest	and merit be accumulated
Make the mind empty	resplendent bright and pure
	<i>(Sec. X. lines 15-20, pp. 98-99)</i>

## IRONY

Irony is a mode of speech in which the real meaning is exactly the opposite of that which is literally conveyed. Irony plays a crucial role in the Mahachat Sermon text. Ironies function at various levels – situational, dramatic and verbal.

**Situational irony** – This is when the author creates a surprise that is the perfect opposite of what one would expect, often creating either humor or an eerie feeling. In the illustration below the truth of power politics and victimization in real life situation is being stressed in an ironical manner. In the instance of a wise man deceiving a foolish man the irony is not just superficially suggested about the ‘folly’ of the foolish, but the ‘wisdom’ of the wise for it can lead to such a mean action as deceit.

The clever raises his victorious thumb    while the fools fall victim to him  
“the virtuous country buffoon            is worth not the city elite”

*(Sec. VI. lines 80-81, p. 54)*

**Dramatic Irony** – is when the reader/listener knows something important about the story that one or more characters in the story do not know. For example, in the Matsi section, the drama comes from the fact that the listeners/readers know that the royal offsprings, Kanha and Chali were given away as slaves to the glutton Chuchok by their father Vessantara during the day time when their mother Masti went to collect fruits in the forest. By divine intervention three animals hindered Masti and prevented her from returning home on that crucial moment in the life of the Bodhisatva when he perfects the penultimate stage in the process of fulfillment of the perfection of *dana*. The trial was set in when the time arrived for giving away his own children. But the mother was quite ignorant of the tragic event of the day, so when she reached home very late in the evening, she at first thought that her children were hiding. She incessantly looked for them everywhere before eventually growing frantic and panicky failing to find them. If the listeners/readers were as oblivious as Masti, there would be virtually no point to the story and they would not commiserate with her pathetic plight and perhaps even would not understand the circumstantial difficulties that crossed the path of the Bodhisattva in his endeavour to achieve complete fulfillment of the perfection of *dana* or charity.

When the sun set	she arrived home
“Two little gems	mother has come where thou both are”
She wondered about her children	where they could be
Every evening she goes to fetch them	from their playing ground
Right and left	in every direction she looked
Which ever way she turned	nothing but emptiness
Tired and lonely	the heart throbbing
When she reached the fence	she left her fruit basket there
Then looked around	but it was all empty and quiet
“Do not be kidding at me	don’t hide from me, dear children”
She tried to seek	and call them
Walking to and fro	she sought for them everywhere
Sad and depressed	not even a shadow could be traced
Could the children be kidding	away from her in hiding?

*(Sec. IX. lines 31-45, pp. 82-83)*

**Verbal Irony** – is when the narrator or a character says the opposite of what he actually means. Verbal irony helps accent the true feeling for/against the situation. For example, Vessantara trusted and loved his wife Matsi and so deliberately avoided disclosing the bitter truth of giving away the children as slaves to the greedy Brahmin. He feared that since she was already tired in the evening from the day’s routine task of collecting fruits from the forest for her children, the sad news would mentally devastate her and so on her face he blamed and bitterly cursed her as being intentionally late in returning to the hermitage that evening. The readers/listeners know the truth that Matsi was hindered by ferocious animals on her way back home. Through the use of verbal irony (as expressed in the words of the Bodhisattva), sung-sermon monks depict the pathetic situation in resemblance to the life of an ordinary couple so as to arouse the feeling of sympathy for Matsi in the hearts of the listeners. Since it is easy to react and respond to familiar situations, most female listeners can instantly internalize the suffering of Masti as a mother, a wife and a woman. Her suffering at this particular situation is similar to any other woman confronting feminine subjugation and victimization within the institution of marriage.

People say that women	have many an artfulness to lure and deceit
They do and	utter many wiles
If we know what they are up to	showers of praises be gotten
Today you did venture	to the forest
Sought no friend	to accompany
Who will agree with you	when you are in the forest?
You have forgotten your children	and involved in promiscuous acts
If I were the king	as before
I would have slit your throat	to cause you die
But now have come to build up	merits and practice meditation
So I do forgive you	it's the first time for you to deviate
Next time do not cry	do not pretend
You pretend to shed tears bringing forth saliva in your mouth as doth the ancient word presaged	
You ask about the kids	who else but you yourself do know
I know not about them	don't you ever ask me
You are shameless	full of pretention and wiles
That's the feminine desultory way	sinuous wiles at various levels
You related to many	least sincere with any
You have played a deceitful game	flirting and deceiving many
Don't tell a lie that you are ill	and ask for chicken soup
No pain no sickness	who can help you
If I seek you another spouse	anew

Your sickness will dissipate you will ask for no medication (*Sec. IX. lines 57-79, pp. 82-83*)

## SYMBOL

A symbol is a word, picture, or idea that stands for something other than itself. It is used as an expressive way to depict an idea. The symbol generally conveys an emotional response far beyond what the word, idea, or image itself dictates. The following example shows the symbolic way of expressing conditional truths, especially about spousal loyalty and dependency.

The lion flees from the mountain because the mountain has no cave, the fish flees the river for the river has no mud, a pupil flees from his teacher because

the teacher lacks wisdom, the bird flees the tree because it has no branches and twigs, the elephant flees the forest because there's no *rai* and *bong* bamboo, the swan flees the pond because there blooms no lotus, a wife absconds her husband because he is incapable to support her. (*Sec. IX. (Discourse form) p. 84*)

## IMAGERY

This is when the author invokes sensory details. Often, this is simply to draw a reader more deeply into a story by helping the reader visualize what is being described. However, imagery may also symbolize important ideas in a story. Like the imagery of a nightmare, barren landscape and ferocious animals obstructing Matsi all in the context of when she lost her two lovely children. **FORESHADOWING** or when the author drops clues about what is to come in a story, which builds tension and the reader's suspense has functional connection to the context in which the following imageries are introduced.

Seven months ago	in the pavilion happily resided the queen
That night was	the beginning the ominous dream presaging
Sleepless and fidgeted	worried until fatigued
As the dawn crept in	so eerie a dream she dreamt
What was it	she knew no way to solve it
Dreamt of a man	who brandished a sword strong and sharp
Wearing the red China rose	on his ears, his sinewy muscles all raised
So dreadfully terrific was it all	as if the sinful evil nearing
She begged for her life	but cared he not the least
Severed her two hands off instead	with blood splattering all over

*(Sec. VIII. lines 6-16, p. 68)*

Feeble in body and hungry	as though got a cramp and swooned
She looked around the rows of trees	with a heart so weak and fragile
Walked to the deep	wide wild jungle
Stepped towards the fruits	the place where she ever sojourned
Erstwhile laden with ripen fruits	verdure and prolific
All disappeared	gone was everything from there
Holding basket and spade	sought yet another tree
Hoping to secure	but turned utterly hopeless when she saw it

Nothing eatable	all decay and rotten
So pitiful a plight of Queen Masti	a broken heart and a pensive mood

*(Sec. VIII. lines 57-66, p. 71)*

## SATIRE

The use of satire comes in various forms such as irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in order to expose, denounce, or deride vice, folly, etc. Through satire human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule as in the following example that illustrates the vice of gluttony through the character of the greedy old Brahmin named Chuchok, who takes away the two lovely children of the Bodhisattva to turn them into slaves serving his young and beautiful wife. But on his way back home from the forest hermitage, he loses the way and eventually arrives at the palace, where Prince Vessantara's parents recognize their grandchildren and lavish the old man with gifts of enormous treasures and delicious food. The greedy old man, however, fails to make use of any of the gifts and dies from overeating.

He is looking back and forth, turning around; seeing many things to eat he laughs greedily. The naked old man hurries to take many pieces of fish into his mouth, then he takes a piece of bacon and then chicken into his mouth, he is really relishing and he continues to devour the fruits such as monkey apple, coconut and continues to drink up the soup from seven pots, after that the dessert and then water. When he finished he went to sleep on his bed but he could not move his belly and was at unease nearly dead, crying and moaning with suffering as if had been ill for years. *(Sec. XI. (Discourse form) pp.112-113)*

## PATHOS

In Greek pathos meant the passions, or deep feeling generally; in modern criticism, however, it is attributed to a scene or passage designed to evoke the feelings of tenderness, pity, or sympathetic sorrow from the audience. Within the context of the Vessantara story there are numerous scenes that depict pathetic universal situation

such as a mother's sorrowful longing for her lost children, grandparents' bemoaning over the loss of grandchildren, the suffering of innocent children at the hands of cruel and selfish people etc. Sung-sermon practitioner monks exploit pathos to a considerably great degree especially in rendering the section "Masti".

Masti so tired	and hapless
Sad and distressed	she cried hopelessly
When the evening set in	darkness loomed all over
The three animals disappeared	making the way for her to go home
In her hurry she tripped	on a stone and tumbled
In her mind she thought	of only her two children
They had waited	for her for so long

She walked just thinking of them sometimes in hurrying steps (*Sec. IX. lines 23-30, p. 82*)

## ALLITERATION

Alliteration or *samphat akson* is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, i.e. a series of words that begin with the same letter or sound alike. Alliteration is used to create emphasis, to add beauty to the writing style, and occasionally to aid in shaping the mood.

Alliteration is used frequently in the text by Ven. Phrakhara Sutasavapimol or Ven. Ajarn Phimpha, the compocer of the fest. He often mixes identical initial consonants in a line, or verse, with other initials which are similar. This use of both same and similar initials in alliterative lines is part of the definition of alliteration provided by Viravong.

*...words which use the same consonants or which have sounds which are very much alike placed next to each other in a row within one line.*<sup>6</sup>

This definition as observed by Carol J. Compton<sup>7</sup> specifically limits alliteration to position of occurrence. Yet alliteration can be found both within lines and across lines in our material.

<sup>6</sup> Viravong, Sila, *Santhalaksana waiyaakon lao phaak si*, (Vientianne: Ministry of Education, 1970), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Compton, J. Carol, *Courting Poetry in Laos: A Textual and Linguistic Analysis, Special Report No. 18*, (Northern Illinois University, 1979), p. 159.

**Alliteration within a line:**

เทียมดั่งปูนแปลงปั้น	สาวสวรรค์ก้าเก็ง
เปิงประเทศเขตแคว้น	แดนใต้กะซ่าเซ็ง
<i>Thiam-dung-poon-plaeng-pun</i>	<i>sao-sawan-kam-kaerng</i>
<i>Peng-pra-thaet-khaet-khwaen</i>	<i>daen-tai-ka-cha-chaeng</i>
Likened to the creation	of celestial maidens
The entire country far and near	ceaselessly talked about her

(Sec. II. lines 7-8, p.12)

จ้งว่าคิ้วคาคัดโค้ง	งามไถ่กล่อมกัน
<i>Jung-wa-khieu-khad-khong</i>	<i>ngam-ko-klom-kan</i>
Eyebrows so well arched	splendidly proportionate all over

(Sec. II. line 12, p.12)

ล่อกล่กแล่น	ลมลั่นเลื่อนไหล
<i>Lok-laek-laen</i>	<i>lom-lin-luean-lai</i>
Furtively run about muttering flirtatious words	(Sec. X. line 74, p. 85)

**Alliteration across adjacent lines:**

เทียมดั่งปูนแปลงปั้น	สาวสวรรค์ก้าเก็ง
เปิงประเทศเขตแคว้น	แดนใต้กะซ่าเซ็ง
<i>Thiam-dung-poon-pleng-pun</i>	<i>sao-sawan-kam-kaerng</i>
<i>Peng-phra-thaet-khaet-khuean</i>	<i>daen-tai-ka-cha-chaeng</i>
Likened to the creation of celestial maidens	
The entire country far and near	ceaselessly talked about her (Sec. II. line 7-8, P.12)

งามดั่งเดือนวันเพ็ญ	เลิศวิไลในหล้า
สองดวงตางามเยียม	องค์พระภูคาคัดโค้ง
<i>Ngam-dung-dieun-wan-phen</i>	<i>lers-wi-lai-nai-la</i>
<i>Song-duang-ta-ngam-yiam</i>	<i>ong-phra-phu-khad-khong</i>
Beautiful as the full moon	superbly gorgeous in the entire world
Her two eyes full of glowing beauty eyelids well curved	(Sec. II. lines 10-11, P.12)

**ASSONANCE**

Assonance or *samphat sara* is the repetition of vowel sounds, most commonly within a short passage of verse. For the most part, the assonance in our material is found within lines: occasionally it may also be found across adjacent lines.

**Assonance within lines:**

ป็นสลนเสลือกลัม

*Buen-salon-saluea-klom*Push ahead in a vain attempt physically decrepit and tiring (*Sec. VII. line 67, p. 61*)

โชมโซโงงโกย

*chom-cho-kong-koi*

ลือกแล่กแล่น

*Lok-laek-laen*

ลมลินเลือนไหล

*lom-lin-luean-lai*Furtively run about muttering flirtatious words (*Sec. X. line 74, p. 85*)

Assonance and alliteration may not only be found in individual lines, but often they are used together within the same line.

เถาว์ลัยเกี้ยว

เป็นมะหลังตั้งต้อน

*Thaowol-kiaw**Pen-ma-ling-ting-ton*

The vine

Creeping up and down

เกลียวยอยย่อยหย่อน

ยามยั่วทั่วแดน

*kliaw-yoi-yoi-yan**yuom-yuao-thua-daen*

its strands and hanging branches swinging

dangling all over (*Sec. VII. line 84, p. 61-62*)

สัตว์ในดงแดนนี้

ทั้งจ้วควายช้างม้า

*Sat-nai-dong-daen-nii**Thang-ngua-khuwai-chang-*

Animals in this territory

Even cow, buffalo, elephant, horse, dog, porcupine, deer abound (*Sec. VII. lines 110-111, p. 63*)

หมูมีชะนีป่า

หมาเม่นมั่งเมย

*moo-mii-cha-nii-paa**maa ma-men-mung-maeu*

swine, gibbon

**ONOMATOPOEIA**

Onomatopoeic words sound like their meaning. Although onomatopoeic words can be found throughout the text, the greatest number is used in the eleventh section entitled *Maharaja* to match with the scene in which the royal procession takes places. In the end of the *Maharaja* section, King Sanjay and Queen Pusati of Sipi along with the royal grandchildren and hundreds and thousands of royal escorts, courtiers and devoted subjects march in a procession to receive Prince Vessantara and his royal consort Masti at their forest hermitage in order to welcome them back to the kingdom. The onomatopoeic words depict the sounds of different musical instruments like

the beating of the giant drum หมุ่ง ๆ (*mung mung*), ฆ้อง (*khong*) and the sound of the footsteps of hundreds of people marching forward in unison ยาบ ๆ (*yub yub*) เยื้อง (*yang*), ยาบ ๆ (*yub yub*) ย้วย (*yuoi*) เพียบ ๆ (*phiyab phiyab*) เพียง (*phiyang*). The sound of each onomatopoeic word resonating with other rhyming words (alliteration and assonance) that form external and internal rhymes, create an extremely colourful picture, the effect of which remains for long in the mind of the listeners.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

All the figures of speech that have been discussed here have a reinforcing effect on the narration of the story. The core essence of the Mahachat sermon lies in revealing the selfless character of the bodhisattva, who is the epitome of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice. This sermon is used by practitioner monks as an instructive tool to encourage and inspire the lay devotees to listen to the story with devotional attentiveness and then apply its moral values – loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, charity, self-sacrifice, honesty, moral courage and determination – into real life situation and practice. In order to delineate the story well and render the narration effective, practitioner monks have played a major role in devising different techniques, one of which is using figurative language. The use of such language has rendered great vitality to the story and has positively affected the proliferation, preservation and continuation of the tradition of the Mahachat sermon as a whole.

The Mahachat sermon text is rich in both religious and linguistic information. Its religious significance is clear from the fact that it provides the foundational base of moral perfection, epitomized in the character of the Bodhisattva. The text provides innumerable examples of proverbs and didactic messages that listeners can reflect upon and bring into practice in day to day life in order to accumulate merit and enrich their lives in spiritual terms. In order that all Buddhists have a chance to internalize the real value of perfecting generosity through a direct access to the sermon, the crucial role that Mahachat sung-sermon practitioner monks play in preserving this oral narrative

tradition is to be recognized.<sup>8</sup> Without the practitioner monks' concerted effort this oral narrative will not survive. Likewise, parents, teachers, elders ought to inculcate an interest in the younger generation to listen to the sermon with attention and mindfulness so that they would not bypass it as a mere part of their culture.

The fact that there are great lessons embedded in the sermon text has to be emphasized and reiterated time and again. This is because from various interactive sessions that the researcher had with teenagers and adolescents, she discovered that they are least interested in the sermon. Not only does the younger generation fail to recognize the richness of this particular aspect of Isan Buddhist tradition, a huge chunk of the urban and rural teenage population is totally illiterate in comprehension of the sermon text which is preserved in the Isan dialect. Therefore, it is advisable that one interprets the Mahachat sermon text both from the religious as well as secular perspective. The secular approach will help us understand and appreciate the richness of the text in linguistic and cultural terms. To the youngsters, who are not so religiously-oriented these days, the secular approach can help inculcate a sense of interest in the sermon text vis-à-vis the indigenous literary heritage and can eventually lead to the cultivation of pride and analytical understanding of the uniqueness of Isan's socio-cultural identity.

The Isan Mahachat sermon text provides very good examples of the poetic usage of the Isan language. The text can be used for analysis in a Thai, Isan, Lao or English literature class to instill interests in students in interpreting 'religious' literature from a secular perspective so as to understand the role of such literature in the context of folk culture and tradition. Mahachat sermon is an integral part of Thai-Isan Buddhist oral narrative tradition. And a literary interpretation will definitely enhance our

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<sup>8</sup> During many interview-sessions monks have informed me that there is no governmental support in recognition of their preservation of the Mahachat sermon as an oral narrative. Their main source of inspirational and financial support comes from the lay devotees who formally invite them to the annual Boonphavet ceremony.

understanding of this crucial point. Linguistic analysis of different versions of the Isan Mahachat sermon can further enrich our understanding of Isan as an evolving language, both in its archaic beauty and contemporary usage. Moreover, translation of different versions of the Isan Mahachat sermon texts can help proliferate the richness of Isan literary tradition alongside the propagation of core Buddhist values such as compassion, generosity, self-sacrifice, selflessness, endurance that are embedded in the text.

In the course of our research documentation of actual Mahachat sung-sermon sessions, we have observed that the rendition of the story varies in style and rhythm among practitioner monks in Northeast Thailand, as for instance, Khonkaen and Roi-et practitioner monks use the Isan dialect predominantly and the indigenous rhythms such as *lomphadphraow*, *changthiammae*, *katenkon*<sup>9</sup> whereas, practitioner monks from Surin and Sisaket infuse Khmer words and rhythmic style in the narration of the story. Comparative study can thus be made of linguistic and stylistic approaches of central Isan and southern Isan practitioner monks. The richness in the narration of

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<sup>9</sup> The many different rhythms that have evolved over time represent stylistic features that are unique of the Isan Mahachat sermon. The most common style of rhythm used in the delivery of sung-sermon is “Thamnong-nai-phuk-nai-mud”, literally translated into English as “tying-wrapping rhythm”. It is the principal rhythm used by monks while chanting from manuscripts. It has the compositional characteristic of Rai, a traditional form of Isan verse. It is probable that this original rhythm has branched off with subtle variations at different localities throughout the northeastern region. Today, a practitioner monk may master any one of the following three styles or all three depending on the locale, individual choice, ability and training. i) Thamnong Lomphad Phrao a rhythm that resembles the drifting of coconut palm fronds in the breeze. It is a slow kind of rhythm requiring alternate strong and weak or mild voice modulation similar to the effect of wind on coconut palm fronds. This rhythm is typical of Ubonratchathani province. ii) Thamnong Chang Thiem Mae a rhythm that resembles the movement of the elephant calf along the side of its mother. In this rhythm, the voice is alternately pressed and released but without complete release; sung at alternately high and low pitch but without producing the sound “eei-eei”. This rhythm is typical of Khonkaen and Chaiyaphum. iii) Thamnong Kaa Taen Kon a rhythm that resembles the movement of a crow along lumps of clay. In this rhythm the voice is rendered as slow and fast alternately similar to a crow’s to and fro jumping, flying off, and landing movement around lumps of mud in the paddy field. This rhythm is typical of Roi-et province.

the Mahachat sermon can be brought out by comparative studies of texts composed by monks from both sides of the Mekong as well. In order to analyze the similarities and differences in rendition, broad scale studies can also be done of the greater Mekong region comprising the Isan, Lao and Khmer Mahachat sermon versions so that the literary and linguistic uniqueness of each tradition can be highlighted from a comparative perspective.

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