

# Telling tales

Wajuppa Tossa is dedicated to preserving folklore for the generations to come

STORY: SIRINYA WATTANASUKCHAI

**T**o many, folklore and storytelling are only analogue forms of children's entertainment that happened to be around before the invention of digital media. But to Wajuppa Tossa, they are disappearing cultural roots of the people. And she's trying to revive them for the current generation and those that follow.

Since 1993, the retired Mahasarakham University (MSU) English-language lecturer has been trying to revive regional folk tales, mainly from the Northeast, where her home town is. But her efforts aren't only about preserving the content of the stories, but the cultural contexts and traditions behind them as well.

"The first thing [for children] to learn from a folk tale is their own dialect," Wajuppa said.

She was speaking at the International Federation of Library Associations and

Institutions (IFLA) Satellite Meeting 2013 recently held in Bangkok. The seminar drew dozens of storytellers and librarians from around the world, seeking ways to preserve and digitise children's and young adult's cultural heritage.

She presented the story *Phaya Taen* to the international audience. Her re-interpretation, accompanied by north-eastern music, detailed the story of a buffalo taking responsibility for his error in delivering a message from the rain god Phaya Taen to human beings. The forgetful buffalo told the people to eat three meals a day, instead of a meal every three days; this left buffaloes working like machines in rice fields because the humans required more food for daily consumption.

A folk tale is an oral tradition retold in the community by the old people to the younger generations — in the local dialect, she said. Also hidden between the

lines are local culture, traditions, and ways of life. At a younger age, the 62-year-old learned her dialect and local traditions from her parents and grandparents through folk tales.

To revive them, Wajuppa started a translation course at the MSU's English Department in 1990s. To complete the course, students were assigned to research folk tales from the elderly in their own communities and translate them into English.

The research not only built inter-generational communication, but the students also learned from the elderly, who in turn did not feel they were being left out of the community.

Through the process, Wajuppa and her students have successfully archived more than 100 folk tales from the elderly in provinces around Thailand in audio and video formats; many of them are being digitised. These tales are being researched, re-interpreted, and retold in her English-language classes and in communities. Her contemporary version of storytelling in English also incorporates local music.

"If the younger generations don't speak their own dialect, the local culture and traditions will be lost," she said.

And the current generation is slowly losing the folk tales because many locals only speak the Northeast dialect without in-depth knowledge of it, while some can't speak at all.

The idea to revive folklore started in 1991 when Wajuppa found the mother tongue of most Isan preschool children wasn't the northeastern dialect. And they weren't able to communicate with the elderly, thanks to the generational and cultural gap.

"Instead of learning about their own folklore like *Phaya Taen*, the children were enjoying Cinderella and Snow White



The retired lecturer entertains youngsters on the National Children's Day in February.



PHOTO: JP WENDRA AJI STYATAMA

Wajuppa Tossa.

[provided by their parents],” she said. Viviana Quinones, the chair of IFLA section libraries for children and young adults who organised the recent meeting, supported the idea of reviving folk tales. She said storytelling and folklore are like other traditional forms of knowledge such as medicine and craftsmanship: they are essential to society because they transmit the cultural heritage to the next generations.

They are also the roots of identity building and inter-generational relations, Quinones said. Wajuppa pointed out that the northeastern dialect has begun

to disappear in the past few decades because parents thought it would be a drawback for their children. In her time, it was common for a child to learn the local dialect from the family and the Thai language in school.

But unlike the bilingual children from the previous generations, in recent decades children were encouraged to learn and speak only the central Thai language both in school and at home, leaving the original mother tongue behind.

“It wasn’t cool for children to speak the dialect in public,” Wajuppa said.

Fluent in Thai, English and the Isan dialect, she held Thailand’s first storytelling festival at the university in Maha Sarakham earlier this year, bringing professional international storytellers to share their experience.

Although it’s best to archive folk tales in different formats, Wajuppa preferred face-to-face storytelling which she described as “heart-to-heart communication”.

“The audience can be easily touched by the traditional storylines and they immediately respond to the lines,” she said.