

## Magical Use of Traditional Scripts in Northeastern Thai Villages

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## Magical Use of Traditional Scripts in Northeastern Thai Villages

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### 1. Introduction

While the Thai script is generally used in Thailand today, it was only after the beginning of the last century that the use of this script spread throughout the country. It can easily be supposed that at the time of nation–state building, the modern educational system expanded and led to the penetration of the Thai script as it is observed today. This supposition, however, is inadequate to provide information on the use of scripts in actual village life. Long before the nineteenth century, the local villages in Thailand were already using some traditional scripts that differed from the Thai script. Hence, we cannot say that the penetration of the Thai script changed the status of the Thai people from “illiterate” to “literate” because, in a sense, they were “literate” long before the modern era. These traditional scripts were not to be discarded; they continued to create new meanings and expand the Thai people’s *raison d’être*. Therefore, there is a need to analyze the modern meanings and uses of traditional scripts in the context of village life.

Similar to other material cultures, scripts are one tool invented by human beings. They are used to represent the oral language and their representation requires certain materials. The study of scripts provides a suitable opportunity to consider the issues of materialization and knowledge. This article aims to analyze from an anthropological perspective the manner in which traditional scripts and knowledge of them are employed in the villages of Northeastern Thailand.

### 2. The History of Traditional Scripts in Northeastern Thailand

#### Traditional Scripts in Northeastern Thailand

In the Isan region of Northeastern Thailand, the spoken language is called *Lao* or *Isan*, a local Thai dialect. Similar to other Thai languages, Isan is a monosyllabic language with 5 or 6 tones. Today, the Thai script is generally used as the written language; however, other scripts, called *akson boran* (ancient scripts), still exist in Isan. There are three traditional scripts in this region: *Tham*, *Thainoi*, and *Khom*. The *Khom* script was derived from the ancient *Khmer* script and was used in stone inscriptions and Buddhist texts. In the villages that I researched, however, the use of this script is not as common as that of the other two scripts.

The Tham script was developed from the ancient *Mon* script. “Tham” means *dharma* (dogma) of Buddhism; this name is derived from the historical fact that these scripts were used in the inscriptions of Buddhist texts. The religious texts of this region are often called *nangsutham*, which means “the Book of Dharma.” Similar scripts can be found in other parts of the Southeast Asian mainland, such as the *Lanna* script of Northern Thailand or the *Lu* script of Sipsongpanna.

The Thainoi script was derived from the *Sukhothai* script and was used in administrative texts and secular literature. Other scripts, which are similar to the Thainoi script, exist with different names, for example, the *Fakkham* script of Northern Thailand. The Lao script, which is presently used in Laos, is another variation of the Thainoi script.

The transition of the scripts in Isan is shown in Table 1 (Dhawatt 1997: 51). Since this article aims to clarify the present state of the traditional scripts, the historical situation prior to the nineteenth century will not be discussed. At the very least, however, it can be said that in this region, the spread of the use of these scripts almost always occurred simultaneously with the spread of Buddhism, because education regarding these scripts was imparted in Buddhist temples. Furthermore, these scripts were mainly used for religious purposes in the form of inscriptions on palm-leaf booklets, known as *bailan*.

**Table 1** History of the Scripts in Isan (Dhawatt 1997: 51)

Century	Culture	Scripts	Language
7–10th C	Dvaravati culture	Pallava, Granta	Sanskrit, Ancient Mon
10–13th C	Khmer culture	Khom	Sanskrit, Ancient Khmer
13–14th C	Unknown		
15th C	Thai–Lao Culture	Tham, Thainoi	Isan, Khmer

### Traditional Scripts after the Introduction of Modern Education

After the Government of Siam established the Compulsory Education Law of 1921, the above-described situation underwent a change. The use of traditional scripts and knowledge of them were neglected and the Thai script was popularized as the national script. By the 1930s, the government had established state schools throughout the country and institutionalized a state-prescribed curriculum (Keyes 1991: 7). Following this, the time-honored knowledge associated with these traditional scripts was separated from the daily lives of the people, losing much of its importance when compared with the kind of knowledge taught in schools. Furthermore, because Isan was a peripheral region of the country, the government endeavored instead to spread knowledge of the culture and history of Siam, whose center was Bangkok.

With the expansion of communication between Central and Northeastern Thailand, the people of Isan strived to absorb the centralized culture. The spoken language in this region, however, did not change drastically; today, almost all villagers speak Isan. Although students

are encouraged to speak Thai in the classroom, they speak freely in Isan after school. With regard to the language used in written texts, however, almost all the texts in Isan villages are written in Thai, and the use of traditional scripts is rarely observed in everyday life. Still, knowledge of traditional scripts endures in certain contexts.

### **The New Wave of Traditional Scripts**

After the modern educational system was established, there was a relative decrease in the value placed on traditional knowledge; however, we can observe signs of change over the last 20 years. With the implementation of educational reforms in 1973, there was a decentralization of the school curriculum and emphasis was placed on teaching local culture and history. After the 1980s, as international relationships in the Southeast Asian mainland became increasingly secure, the government began to allow a diversity of cultures within the country. Interest in the local cultures continues to expand even today, and since the last decade of the twentieth century, the word *phumphanya*—local knowledge—has drawn the attention of the entire country.

The same situation applies to traditional scripts. The traditional script of Northern Thailand—Lanna—has attracted attention from the academic level to the popular level. The Lanna script is taught as traditional culture in some public schools in the region. Renewed interest in the traditional scripts first occurred at the academic level, especially from interests in Buddhism or herbal medicine. Today, interest has started spreading along with the countrywide rise of localism.

### **3. Traditional Scripts in the Villages of Northeastern Thailand**

We have considered the situation of traditional scripts of Thailand at the national level; however, the scripts and knowledge of them are actually used in the everyday lives of the villagers. At this point, the focus shifts to the villagers' use of scripts.

#### **Research Method**

These data were collected from field research conducted in three villages in the Muang district of Khon Kaen Province, Northeastern Thailand, between April and September 2001. Khon Kaen Province is located in the northeast, 450 km from Bangkok. The central region of the province has undergone extensive development since the 1960s and has now become one of the most important provinces in the fields of communication, travel, education, and electricity. The research villages—NK village, DY village, and NG village—are located 15 km west of the center of Khon Kaen City. Every village has 230–280 households and a population of 1100–1400. Most of the villagers cultivate sticky rice—the cultivation of which depends mainly on rainfall—as well as sugarcane and cassavas. In addition, due to the proximity of these villages to the city, some villagers work in Khon Kaen City as sweepers, construction workers, and factory workers.

These villages appear to be typical “suburban villages” in Isan, and over the last 20 years, they have experienced economic and material developments that usually occur in urban areas.

### The Monks' Knowledge of Scripts

At present, few villagers in Isan—whether monks or laymen—are able to read and write the traditional scripts. Nevertheless, considering that traditional scripts were taught in the Buddhist temples, it is reasonable to differentiate the villagers in terms of monks and laymen. Table 2 provides the number of monks who are still able to read and write the Tham script. None of the temples listed in the table offer regular lessons on the traditional scripts.

An 80-year-old monk named BN, who belonged to the SK temple in NK village, learned to read the Tham script from a monk in the same temple, when he became a novice at the age of 17. After the death of the latter, BN began to teach the Tham script. Since there were no printed textbooks that taught the Tham script, the monks learned to read the script using a handwritten palm-leaf text. At that time, the Buddhist texts were written only in Tham and not in Thai; therefore, almost all the monks were capable of reading the Tham script. Yet BN did not learn to write using this script. The need to transcribe the old palm-leaf texts is quite rare; what was emphasized was mainly the ability to read the texts. According to BN, the Tham script was taught in the SK temple until approximately 20 years ago; since then, interest in the script began to decline because the monks were able to learn through the use of Buddhist textbooks printed in the Thai script. Learners are no longer required to use the palm-leaf booklets; they can use textbooks printed in Thai.

In the SM temple in DY village, there is only one monk who can read the Tham script. Monk KY, now aged 71, first learned to read Tham in a nearby village when he became a monk 38 years earlier. KY can still read Tham, but he does not use it very often to write. Although he possesses the *lekcan*, a pencil-like tool with a needle, used to make inscriptions on palm leaves, he never uses it. According to KY, approximately 30 years earlier, there were many monks who could read and write in Tham, and he often saw them transcribe the Buddhist texts. Some of the monks were familiar with other traditional scripts such as Thainoi or Khom. Most of the palm-leaf texts currently in existence at the SM temple were transcribed by these monks.

The emphasis on reading over writing while teaching the Tham script appears to have originated from the monks reading Tham more often than they wrote it. The Tham script was scribed on palm leaves, and these palm-leaf texts were read during certain rituals such as funerals and annual rituals like *bunphawet* or *bunkhausak*. Today, however, even on these occasions, they do not need to use Tham-written texts; they read from Thai-printed palm-leaf

**Table 2** Number of Monks Who Use Traditional Scripts

	Total No. of Monks	Literate Monks	Total No. of Novices	Literate Novices
DY Village	9 (70s = 1, 60s = 2, 50s = 1, 20s = 5)	1 (70s = 1)	1	0
NK Village	10 (80s = 1, 20s = 9)	1 (80s = 1)	0	0
NG Village	5 (60s = 1, 40s = 2, 30s = 2)	0	0	0

\* The figures within parentheses represent the number of monks by age group.

books.

Most novices are ordained only for a short period of time and they are concerned more with secular knowledge than with Buddhist teachings. Even the novices or monks who remain in retreat do not have multitudinous incentives to learn the Tham script. In Thailand, the government institutionalized Buddhist education and examinations and excluded local script traditions like Tham (Iijima 1998). Thus, irrespective of whether novices are ordained for the short or long term, they are losing interest in learning the Tham script.

### The Laymen's Knowledge of Scripts

In Theravada Buddhism, males are expected to be ordained once during their lifetime; however, most of them eventually de-robe. This is why even laymen learned religious dogma and traditional scripts. Table 3 shows the number of laymen who can read and write the Tham script.

Although some laymen have learned the Tham script, they can easily forget how to write and read it because they do not have the opportunity to put this skill to use. In the villages, however, there remain some who continually use the Tham script, even after de-robing. These are religious specialists called *mothams*; they provide various services that use the power derived from dharma, such as counseling, magical healing, or exorcism (cf. Hayashi 2003). In the researched villages, it is rare to find laymen, other than mothams, who are able to read or write in traditional scripts.

**Table 3** Number of Laymen Who Use Traditional Scripts

	Literate Laymen
DY Village	2 (60s = 1, 50s = 1)
NK Village	4 (80s = 2, 70s = 2)
NG Village	1 (50s = 1)

\* The figures within parentheses represent the numbers of laymen by age group.

### The Mothams' Knowledge of Scripts

According to S. J. Tambiah (1970: 132–133), like the *mosong* or *molamphifa*, the mothams are categorized as “secular specialists for whom literacy is not required.” Based on my interviews with the villagers, however, these days, the learning process of the mothams is always related to scripts; however, in some cases, a person could become a motham without having knowledge of ancient scripts. In a sense, literacy is an important criterion for becoming a motham.

To become a motham, a student must learn magical spells from his master by transcribing the master's spells into his own notebook. After he learns to repeat the spell, he will progress to learning other spells. Finally, when he has learned a sufficient number of spells, the master permits the learner to observe the ritual of *phithiyokkhru* to venerate his master, and

he becomes a motham. At present, the notebooks used are written mostly in the Thai script; however, some sections are written in the Tham or Khom scripts.

Most mothams can read the Tham script, though not completely; their knowledge of traditional scripts is limited. While they learn via transcription, miswriting and lipography frequently occur in the transmission of knowledge from master to apprentice. When I learned spells from a motham in NG village, the master taught me three different spellings for one spell. After having learned the Pali spell, he rectified two parts of it the next day. A month later, he realized another mistake and corrected the spell again. These corrections are shown in Plate 1. Surprisingly, the master explained that such mistransmissions were not uncommon.

These spells used by mothams have certain characteristics. The first concerns the mixing of multiple languages. Today, the spells are written in the Thai script, whereas the languages used are Pali and Lao (Isan). The Pali words written by a motham using the Thai script are different from the general method of writing in Pali using the Thai script as taught in contemporary Buddhist schools. This is shown in Plate 2. Apart from the spacing and some different letters in the Thai script, there does not appear to be a big difference in their pronunciation. It was after the 1950s that the modern Thai orthography incorporated standardized spellings of Pali and Sanskrit (Enfield 1999: 259–260). Since then, this orthography has become a tradition only in orthodox Buddhism, and mothams do not refer to it. With the help of notebooks, they transmit their knowledge mainly on the basis of sounds.

Second, most mothams are not entirely aware of the meanings of the spells. They know how to use the spells, and even if they know their meanings, their knowledge is merely fractional. They are usually unable to provide a word-for-word explanation of the spells in Pali. Generally, they do not need to learn their in-depth meanings; they complete their learning when they are able to repeat the spells (Veidlinger 2006: 161–162). The abovementioned mistransmission of the spell that I experienced testifies to the sound-based nature of the traditional scripts. Earlier, texts were written based on the sounds produced

**Plate 1** One Motham's Correction Process in Teaching a Spell

	Corrected Parts Underlined
July 20, 2001	ayatancawitha tancaappri tancasuwi tancasupawai tancakarotha appewanammat
July 21, 2001	ayatancawitha tancaappri <u>tancasuwilekhi</u> <u>tancasu wattatsi</u> tancakarotha appewanammat
August 24, 2001	ayatancawitha tancaappri <u>tancasuwi</u> <u>tancasupawai</u> tancasuwilekhi tancasu wattatsi tancakarotha appewanammat

**Plate 2** The Difference between Mothams and Monks in the Writing of Pali

Written by the Mothams	saphasothiphawantume
Revised by Monks	satha sotathi phawantu me

when someone read or chanted them. Hence, mistakes often occurred not from letters but from sounds, such as the substitution of long vowels for short vowels or unpronounced consonants for pronounced ones.

Some mothams use traditional scripts for offering ritual services. A motham in NG village makes amulets by inscribing Tham-written spells on a thin copper plate; these amulets are believed to protect the wearer from evil spirits. Sometimes, he writes spells in Tham on stones and places them in 8 directions around the entire village in order to protect the villagers from evil spirits. He often writes the Tham script as part of other rituals, such as for protection from fire or when performing an exorcism. Mothams do not use Thai-printed books when learning spells; they always rely on manuscripts that differ from those used by monks. The mothams explain that this is because the manuscripts are more sacred than printed books.

In comparison to the mothams' thorough knowledge, their knowledge of scripts is only fractional. They know the Tham script only partially and non-systematically; they do not understand the meaning of each word in their Pali spells, and as observed above, transmitted knowledge often appears to be altered. Nonetheless, since they function as religious specialists, the social role of mothams is still essential in village life. This situation does not appear to be inspired by the "revival of localism," particularly in the urban areas of Thailand. At the same time, we cannot say that traditions are fading in the process of "modernization." As corroborated in the recently studied situation, mothams appear to provide new meanings to Tham-written manuscripts.

#### **4. Materials for Writing and the Act of Writing**

##### **Materials for Writing**

Traditionally, there were two types of documents in Isan: *Koi* paper documents and *bilan* palm-leaf documents. The palm-leaf documents are much more popular in the researched villages. The text is incised on palm leaves using a *lekcan*. Ink is then applied and rubbed in to make the scratches visible. Then, the palm leaves are punched and filed like a booklet. Most of the palm-leaf texts are about Buddhist teachings; however, folklore, custom laws, astrology, local medicines, rituals, and magic spells are also found therein. These palm-leaf texts are not very durable; moreover, they need to be transcribed so that they can be transmitted to the next generation. Transcribed palm leaves were traditionally offered to the temple as a form of merit-making. Some of the palm leaves were read by monks on occasions such as annual festivals or funerals, and they functioned to maintain a sense of morality among the villagers (Dhawatt 1995: 258).

The Buddhist chants in the palm-leaf texts were previously written in the Pali language, in the Tham script. In recent times, however, there has been an increase in the number of Thai-printed palm leaves. The Tham and Thai scripts are different; but when the monks read the text during a ritual, they sound almost identical. In Buddhist rituals, it is the sounds made reading the chants aloud that surpass the words written. While there was an increase in the Thai-printed palm leaves and a decline in the need to learn Tham, the text is still written in Pali. In reality, many of the monks or novices do not understand the meanings



and most of the laymen are unaware of the content. Still, even the laymen know that such texts are sacred and usually read on special occasions. The villagers' knowledge concerning traditional scripts is not uniform; hence, the degree of each individual's knowledge varies.

Lately, it has not been easy to find the palm tree, *tonlan*, from which bailan is made. With the exploitation of the forests for cultivation of commercial plants such as cassava, sugarcane, and eucalyptus, there has been a dearth of tonlans around the researched villages. Due to this, bailan paper is no longer made in the village.

Another material that is used to write with is the lekcan, a pencil-like piece of wood with a nail at the top. The traditional method of writing with a lekcan is peculiar. It is gripped firmly in the right hand, not in the same manner that one grips a pencil, and the incisions are made with the support of the thumb of the left-hand. Of late, these traditional methods of writing have rarely been observed, and in most cases, the lekcan is used in a manner similar to that of a pencil.

One motham in NK village possesses a lekcan that was given to him by his motham master. Using it, he made a carving on a tamarind tree that was believed to be sacred, and the master consecrated the lekcan. Mothams often use this writing instrument when performing exorcism rituals. They write Tham texts on materials, such as a bamboo stick or house pillar, to make it sacred. Sometimes they use the Tham script to write spells on the subject's head or body to expel the evil spirits that are believed to have possessed the person.

In contrast, the Buddhist monks in NK and DY villages do not treat the lekcan as a sacred object. Since they are no longer required to write on bailan, the lekcan is neglected. The difference between the mothams' and the monks' attitudes towards the lekcan is not only reflected in their personal beliefs in the magical powers of material objects but in their different concerns about traditional scripts and palm-leaf texts.

### **The Introduction of Print Technology**

As mentioned above, in recent years, Tham-written, palm-leaf manuscripts have been replaced by Thai-printed palm-leaf texts. For the last 30 years, printed palm-leaf texts have been distributed by a bookstore in Khon Kaen City. The palm-leaf texts that are retailed at this bookstore are printed in the Thai script, never in the Tham script. There is no local printing office that uses palm leaves; therefore, the bookstore purchases Thai-printed palm leaves from a wholesale dealer in Bangkok.

Prior to the introduction of printed palm-leaf texts, manuscripts were written only in ancient scripts such as Tham script. Some of these manuscripts were illegible due to the handwriting, whereas the printed ones are legible to anyone who can read Thai. Unlike the printed palm-leaf texts, publishing information such as the title and year of publication were not included in Tham manuscripts. Further, the size of the palm leaf varies, but the printed texts are available in a standard size.

It appears that printing technology played a threefold role in drawing attention to the palm-leaf texts. First is the improved accessibility of the traditional text. Since these texts are printed in the Thai script, villagers or monks who cannot read traditional scripts are able to read traditional texts. The villagers also offer these printed texts to the temple as a

merit-making practice, and as before, the monks teach Buddhist morals from the palm-leaf texts. Second, the printed texts have facilitated the preservation of traditional texts. Since no one could read the traditional scripts, the Tham-written palm leaves in the village temple were almost abandoned. Printing technology revalued and reproduced these traditional texts, which were no longer being transcribed (Koret 1999: 232–233). Third, the printed texts have raised interest in the academic field. The distributed palm-leaf texts are collected and archived by universities or NGOs such as the Palm Leaf Book Preservation Project of Mahasarakham University in Northeast Thailand. The collected data and archives can be co-referenced by international researchers.

Still, not all the villagers have keenly accepted this printed version. One motham in NG village regards the palm-leaf manuscripts as more sacred than the printed ones. While the materials on which they were written still remain, some religious meanings have changed along with the writing technology. Scripts are said to have two different directivities (Kawada 1990: 219–221, Veidlinger 2006: 120–121): a secret or cultic nature and an engagement or discursive nature. Some scripts are apt to create a sense of secrecy, and others are useful to develop a sense of engagement. The former is related to religion and only pertains to a minor group of a limited number of literates. The latter is used in the printing of contracts, administrative documents, or laws and emphasizes the usefulness of relationships between human beings, thereby extending its scope beyond the limited group. In reality, these two characteristics either co-exist or one is more dominant.

In Isan, we observe that while monks use the palm-leaf manuscripts for sermons, mothams use the transcripts as magical tools. The scripts and materials used by mothams appear to be regarded as more sacred. When the palm-leaf manuscripts were read in order to teach Buddhism, the Tham script retained both characteristics—the cultic and the discursive. After the establishment of modern education and the circulation of the Thai script, however, the Thai script acquired a deeper, more discursive meaning than the traditional scripts. At the same time, printing technology enabled the Thai script to become more available to the public than traditional scripts. In contrast, the Tham script lost its function of transmitting knowledge, as a result of which users of Tham decreased and the secrecy of the language increased. Thus, the Thai script gained its discursive quality and Tham gained secrecy. This can be seen in the differences in the print of standardized and non-standardized palm-leaf manuscripts and in differing attitudes toward the lekcan as a useless or a magical object. From the perspective of technology and tools, the Tham script can be regarded as having a greater tendency toward secrecy than engagement, and as a personal rather than a universal object.

## **5. Practice and Knowledge of the Tham Script**

As already mentioned, Tham is no longer frequently used, and its importance is relatively minor compared with the national Thai script. Nevertheless, the Tham script endures and is not expected to disappear in the near future. The traditional scripts have survived despite changes in the surrounding environment. Finally, in order to understand the background of this situation, it is necessary to consider the sacredness of the scripts.

Knowledge of a script includes not only the capacity to read and write it but also the ability to perform various practices associated with it. A monk who learns to read Tham and Pali may be able to chant the scripts and understand what they mean. A motham may be able to read the Tham script, but he is usually unaware of the meaning of the Pali words. A villager who listens to the monk's chant may not be able to read texts in the Tham script, but he knows that they are not written in Thai and that he should offer transcribed palm-leaf texts to the temple to gain merits; he might also know that they are sacred. These three entities—motham, villager, and monk—are all concerned with the texts or scripts in some way, and in a sense, they all have some knowledge of the Tham script. It can be said that knowledge concerning traditional scripts is transmitted to most villagers in some form or the other. According to Berger and Luckman (1966: 43–46), these situations can be analyzed as the “social distribution of literacy.”

In studies of Western society, texts are considered to refer only to reading or writing; however, in the Isan region, some of the traditional texts are not necessarily read but are used without any interest in the written word. In *yantra*, which is a small paper or cloth used for magic, some of the traditional scripts are geometrically disposed to unpronounceability. *Yantra* is made sacred only by the presence of traditional scripts. The scripts in a *yantra* cannot be read but can be utilized to drive away bad luck or evil spirits. Some bailan booklets are bound by wood boards and tightly wrapped up in silk cloth as if they are not intended for referral again. Such palm-leaf books, offered to the Buddhist temple to gain merit, are usually stored in temples without any inventory or intention of reference. Some uses of scripts and texts in Isan do not place emphasis on what is written but rather on how to use materials with scripts.

If we view knowledge of the scripts from this perspective, knowledge does not only mean the ability to read or write but can also be said to lie in the villagers' practices, such as acts of venerating, healing, and other magical practices. Knowledge of the scripts would function in the performance of these practices through the media of script, materials, and human bodies. Traditionally, monks learned to read and write the traditional scripts using palm-leaf texts. The knowledge gained was applied to chanting the contents scribed on the palm leaves and transcribing old texts. In order to gain merits, the laymen offered the temples palm leaves on which traditional scripts were written, and during festivals, they enjoyed the readings of palm-leaf texts. Mothams wrote spells using traditional scripts; these spells were a magical protection against enemies. The traditional knowledge of scripts was always implemented in actual practice and materials.

The spread of national education and printing technology made the Thai script much more universal, even in Isan. In contrast, the Tham script has gained a greater degree of secrecy but continues to be used in rural areas. As observed in the examples of the palm-leaf text and the lekcan, the materials and tools, which cannot be separated from knowledge of the script, also acquired a quality of secrecy. “Secrecy” here does not mean that the traditional scripts become unfamiliar. Instead, it means that the unfamiliarity of the script itself maintains its popularity; therefore, the Isan villagers know what traditional scripts are and how they are used for magical purposes.

What makes traditional scripts and their related materials magical? One possible reason



**Fig. 1** A writing tool called the lekcan



**Fig. 2** A motham's textbook of spells



Fig. 3 Magical writing to protect the village from spirits



Fig. 4 A motham writing Tham on a bamboo stick





Fig. 5 Thai-printed palm leaves and Tham manuscripts



Fig. 6 Method of writing with a lekcan

is that, in this case, the traditional scripts lay more emphasis on sound rather than writing. As we have seen, the main use of traditional scripts was their intermittent transmission of sound from teacher to student, or the former generation to the next. Since the ultimate teacher here is imagined to be Buddha, most of the bailan booklets are thought to contain Buddha's teachings or Buddha himself (Strong 2004: 38). According to Veidlinger (2006: 175–176), in premodern Buddhist society, oral transmission had more authenticity than written transmission because the former requires both a speaker and a listener, whereas written transmission does not. The direct link between speaker and listener is believed to aid the transmission of something more than what is only written. Even when manuscripts of bailan were made, a traditional script was transcribed by listening to voices read the old manuscript. These manuscripts, made via oral transmission, are also believed to contain the same sacredness as those imparted in the oral tradition.

When mothams chant or write a spell from traditional scripts in a ritual, they always complete the process by blowing on an object; simply chanting or writing a spell does not appear to be enough to complete the ritual. In this case, something more than the spell itself is needed; therefore, their breath completes the ritual. The breath represents the corporality of the practitioner and the substance of the magical power. The magical practices concerning traditional scripts often require such substance or tangibility to help the villagers understand them.

If traditional scripts focused only on what was written, they would have completely replaced the Thai script already; however, traditional scripts and their related materials are meant to transmit metainformation rather than literal information. The metainformation is not easily acquired because understanding it requires background knowledge concerning cultural and religious traditions, which is not the same kind of understanding taught in modern education. In Isan, although Buddhist education is nationalized and monks neglect the traditional scripts, mothams still retain interest in regional traditions. The traditional scripts in Isan are not only read or written, but also practiced mainly by mothams, and they construct not only a literal, but also a tangible reality for religious life.

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