

# PLANTS, ANIMALS, SALT AND SPIRITS:

HOW PEOPLE LIVE WITH AND  
TALK ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT  
IN RURAL CAMBODIA,  
LAOS AND THAILAND



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**Plants, Animals, Salt and Spirits: How People Live with and Talk about the Environment in Rural Cambodia, Laos and Thailand**

March 2015

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# FOREWORD

In the Mekong Basin, where people's livelihoods are deeply rooted in the natural world of rivers and forests, many legends, tales and narratives that revolve around nature have been created and handed down from generation to generation. These stories have played an important role in protecting nature by avoiding the over-exploitation of natural resources. In recent years, however, profit-focused economic development has increased, leading to the rapid deterioration of the environment. At the same time, traditional knowledge of natural resource use as conveyed by these tales is being lost.

"The People's Stories Project" is an exploratory effort launched in August 2014 with three purposes: (1) To record legends, old tales, folklore and narratives, and access the local knowledge and experience over natural resource use found therein; (2) To develop an environmental education tool kit which makes practical use of people's stories to bring about better governance of local resources, and; (3) To convey knowledge of local natural resource use and the richness of the world described in the stories to researchers, students, people involved in development, younger generations and citizens in general, providing a new point of view for observing natural resource management in the Mekong Region.

Seven Cambodian, Japanese, Lao and Thai researchers and NGO workers set out to investigate rural areas in Northeastern Cambodia, Central and Southern Laos and Northern and Northeastern Thailand. This booklet introduces stories collected in the first year of the project and attempts to present possibilities for practical use of these people's stories in local environmental preservation efforts.

The research team owes a debt of gratitude to the many people who helped us in this project. There are too many to list them all here, but we received kind assistance from local communities in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. In particular, without the help of local villagers who related their stories to

outsiders like us, our project in general and this booklet in particular would never have materialized. We received tremendous assistance, especially from Mr. Randall Arnst, Mr. Amrit Muadthong, Mr. Ariya Rattanawichaikul and Dr. Suksawang Simana, in making this booklet. We were also financially supported by the Nippon Foundation's Asian Public Intellectuals (API) Program and the Japan Fund for Global Environment of the Environmental Restoration and Conservation Agency for our fieldwork and publication of this booklet. We express our gratitude to both of these organizations. Note that the content and claims contained in this booklet are those of the project team and have no connection with any of the aforementioned individuals and organizations.

Through these stories, this booklet may be of some use in gaining an understanding of the connections between people and their natural environment from the perspective of rural villagers living in the Mekong Basin. We would be happy if it provides a new approach to considering development and environmental issues.

March 2015

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# PART I

INTRODUCTION: WHY PEOPLE'S STORIES?



# INTRODUCTION: WHY PEOPLE'S STORIES?

This booklet has come out of a research project to collect various types of stories told by local community members living in rural areas of three Mekong countries, namely Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. In this short introduction, we would like to explain why we started the project, how we collected the stories, and what we learned from them so far.

## 1. Why People's Stories?

All of us in the project team (see "Project Member Profiles") have work related to development in the Mekong Region. As such, we often use terms such as "sustainable development" and "natural resource management" in our conversations with others. While these concepts are useful as guiding principles, we sometimes feel they are somewhat foreign to us.

There can be several reasons for this. One, these and other key words ("gender equity," "inclusiveness," "safeguards" and "poverty" to name a few) in the development sector have often been coined and brought to the region from outside. We struggle to understand what they mean to our work. Two, these terms are usually used with scientific data, typically statistics. They are abstracted from the daily life that we see, hear and feel in our contact with local communities in the Mekong Region. Three, they almost always originate from English, and none of us in the project team use English as a first language.

How can we deal with terms such as "sustainable development" and "natural resource management" in ways that are grounded in the realities of the Mekong Region? How can we enrich the concepts behind these expressions by embracing details we observe within the lives of community members we meet, including their feelings and emotions? How can we benefit from these terms, while paying due respect to traditional practices among local communities? Finding answers to these questions is one of the purposes of this project.

Toward that end, we have realized that stories local community members often tell us may be used as tools. Consider the following story, which one of us heard from a villager in Southern Laos:

*Once, a soldier stepped into a spirit forest. He discovered a lot of tobacco leaves there and collected them. However, when trying to leave the forest, he could not find an exit. It was because he took more tobacco leaves than he could possibly consume for himself. No matter how hard he searched, he could not find a way out of the forest. Realizing what might have been the problem, he finally decided to return the tobacco leaves to the forest. The moment he dropped them on the ground, he was able to see an exit in front of him.*

The teller of this story reports the incident in very specific local contexts, such as a spirit forest. However, what he says is really about the management of resources. The story highlights a moral dimension of the soldier's misbehavior to avoid the over-exploitation of the natural resource, in this case, tobacco leaves. It also incorporates the teller's feelings of awe towards the forest spirit. As this example shows, a story can provide detailed contexts and a core message around a particular topic, and put them together into an organic whole through everyday language.

We have encountered similar verbal performances when working with villagers in the Mekong Region and have been struck by the effectiveness they have in making the point and creating lively conversations. We have thought that such verbal repertoires, or people's stories, can be viewed as locally-shared intellectual resources, based on which key development issues can be reviewed. People's stories can be seen as common repositories, where local community members have encoded their experiences with the environment, as well as ethical, aesthetic and spiritual values they have formed, in ordinary language. Such an accumulation of wisdom can be used to enhance our understanding of various issues which we often try to capture through such terms as "sustainable development."

## 2. The People's Stories Project

We named our research program “The People’s Stories Project” and started to collect stories from local communities in August 2014. As of January 2015, we collected 102 stories in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. Fieldwork sites and schedule are summarized in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1: Fieldwork sites and schedule

Site (District/Province/ Country)	Date	Group	Major Topics	# of Stories
Kusuman, Sakhon Nakhon, Thailand	12-13 August 2014	Thai So	history of migration, forests	3
Pakse, Champasak, Laos	7 September	Lao	place names	1
Khong, Champasak, Laos	8-9 September and 4-5 October	Lao	animals, place names	5
Khong Chiam, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand	21 September	Isan	spiritual beliefs	1
Mae Suai, Chiang Rai, Thailand	8-10 October	Akha	animals, genealogy, music	32
Hin Heup, Vientiane, Laos	11-12 October	Kmhmu'	ghost, trees, animals	22
Kusuman, Sakon Nakhon, Thailand	15 and 19 October	Thai So, Isan	naga	5
Senmonorom and Pechr Chenda, Mondulkiri, Cambodia	18-21 October	Bunong	rice-planting, baskets, herbs, songs	20
Selaphum, Roi Et, Thailand	25 October	Isan	naga, salt, rivers	6

Site (District/Province/ Country)	Date	Group	Major Topics	# of Stories
Rasi Salay, Sisaket, Thailand	30 October and 1 November	Isan	spirits, forests	4
Prachaksinlapakhom, Udon Thani, Thailand	9 November	Isan	salt production, rivers	1
Seka, Bueng Kan, Thailand	21 November	Isan	salt production, rivers	2
<b>Total</b>				<b>102</b>

Most stories were recorded by audio or video. The 102 stories were first told in local languages and then translated into national languages. An English summary was made for each story. The summary was then put into a card (a “story card”) alongside information related to the teller’s profiles and the recording date and place. All 102 recordings, including English summaries and data-related information, will be posted on a website for the public’s use.

Since the project was exploratory, our definition of people’s stories were broad. Stories were defined as “an intellectual resource in which the community has collectively accumulated their common analyses, feelings, ethics, aesthetics and spiritual values relating to their experiences with the environment in everyday language.” The data set that was collected included myths, legends, folk tales, life histories, narratives, anecdotes and songs. Most of the time, the data gathering was conducted outside

the teller's house in a village. Other villagers often joined. A few of them cheered or helped the teller. Others stood and listened. Every once in a while the teller also asked the audience for help when s/he was not sure about the story.

While our sampling framework was rather unstructured, we focused on indigenous and ethnic minority communities as a fieldwork site. TABLE 2 summarizes the indigenous and minority groups we visited. Language names, classification and the estimated number of speakers are based on Lewis et al. (2015).

TABLE 2: Indigenous and ethnic minority communities studied

Country	Group Name	Language Name	Language Family	# of Speakers
Cambodia	Bunong	Bunong	Mon-Khmer	37,500
Laos	Khmhu'	Khmhu'	Mon-Khmer	614,000
Thailand	Akha	Akha	Sino-Tibetan	56,600
	Lao	Isan	Tai-Kadai	15,000,000
	Thai So	Thai So	Mon-Khmer	70,000

One of the reasons we focused on these groups was that the existence of their language and culture are under threat. We hoped this project could contribute to documenting and reviving the linguistic and cultural resources that these indigenous and ethnic minority groups still possess.

### 3. Results

Some of the 102 stories are quite long and last for 20 to 30 minutes. Others are short and are less than five minutes. The stories cover a wide range of topics, including the community's history and genealogy, traditions and customs, and knowledge on plants and herbs. Quite a few stories describe the origin of local place names, spiritual beliefs and livelihoods, such as traditional salt production. There are six performances of singing and playing a musical instrument (see TABLE 1). We have chosen 17 stories, translated them into English in full, and reproduced them in Part II.

#### 3.1. Functions of the stories

Some of the 102 stories store information and knowledge that is important to the local community. They serve the purpose of sharing the information and knowledge among the community members, and passing it on to younger generations. Such stories are about using herbs and other medical plants to stay healthy, conducting ceremonies to plant and harvest crops such as rice, and building a new village.

Among the 17 stories included in Part II, *Searching for a New Land* falls in this category. This story is from Akha people living in Northern Thailand, suggesting that the location of a new village cannot be chosen only for convenience, but the area has to be blessed. In fact, Akha elders memorize details about how a village entrance and houses should be built when establishing a new village. *Rhino Head Pond* from Northeastern Thailand also documents how the community has come into existence. It also describes the community's main livelihood, salt production.

Other stories more directly communicate particular values that are meaningful to the group. They draw the attention of the community members, especially children, to differences between proper and prohibited behaviors. The teller of *Phadaeng and Nang Ai* from Northeastern Thailand explicitly talks about a negative impact (land collapse) of overexploiting natural resources, in this case, underground salt. *The Efficacy of Fear – Forest Spirits*, also from

Northeastern Thailand, summarizes a few villagers' recalling the punishments they have experienced due to breaking taboos. *The Owl and the Deer* from Kmhmu' people in Central and Northern Laos highlights the negative consequence of bad behaviors such as cheating. The central theme of *Mo Hue and Mon Yi* from Akha people is about children's obligation to take care of their parents. *Origin of a Swing* from the same group shows the value of self-sacrifice through a heroic episode of a brother and a sister who put the world in order. *Brother Rui*, *Source of Lice* seems to suggest that innocence pays off eventually.

A third group among the 102 stories seems to result from the community's efforts to understand or make sense of the surrounding environment. These stories make the community members feel more attached to the locality and thus strengthen their identity as a community member. Both *The Legend of the Water Buffalo King* and *Somphamit Waterfall and the Tale of the Dolphin* from Southern Laos are such examples. The former is about a patricide, but has become a resource to explain local place names in Siphandon. A village chief in the area also testified that the story had led to the taboo of not killing animals, contributing to the conservation of nature on his island. Stories relating to the origin of place names and animals fall into this category, including *History of Keo Seima District* from Bunong communities in Northeastern Cambodia, and *A Civet Cat* from Kmhmu' people in Central and Northern Laos.

One story can serve two or all of the three functions described above. For instance, *White Elephant Path* from Northeastern Thailand is the community's memory of its own past. However, it also indicates how the community has made sense of the rich salt reserve found all over the area where they live. Furthermore, the story is delivered with a strong Buddhist tone, and tries to explain how the world operates through the riddle "What is dark and light?"

The three functions of the stories illustrated above can also be fulfilled through other verbal means. For instance, parents can explicitly tell their children, "You must care about older people." However, what stories can uniquely do is communicate such a message in indirect ways. For instance,

in *Mo Hue and Mon Yi* from Akha people, the aged father does not condemn his children for having forgotten the care he gave to them when they were smaller. Instead, he sends a reminder by comparing himself to a flycatcher who is feeding her babies. This indirect messaging through a story is effective among those who hold close relationships with one another, such as family and community members. It is also more appropriate because it is less face-threatening. Stories provide enough detail and context so listeners can get the message. Stories are also memorable, enjoyable and worth passing on to future generations. In this regard, *Mo Hue Mon Yi* is interesting in that it also has its own message as a story.

### 3.2. Recurrent themes

Transformation among plants, animals, humans and spirits frequently occurs in the 102 stories. Among the 17 stories in Part II, *Origin of Elephants* from Bunong people in Northern Cambodia is about transformation from humans to elephants, and *Pho Yal* from Kmhmu' people includes changing from a plant to a human. Supernatural beings also change themselves into a plant (a banana tree) in *Great-Grandfather Ja Klawa*, an animal (a squirrel) in *Phadaeng and Nang Ai* and a human (a hermit) in *White Elephant Path*. It is also interesting that seemingly useless human waste, such as urine and scurf, can also be transformed into a cat in *How Cats Came to the World*, and humans and salt in *White Elephant Path*. These stories may suggest that local community members feel the ubiquitous life in the environment. They might also be related to the concept of reincarnation. We need more in-depth analysis on these issues.

Water buffalos also appear quite often in the 102 stories. *Legend of the Water Buffalo King* from Southern Laos and *White Elephant Path* from Northeastern Thailand are examples of this. This may be by accident, or because water buffalos live throughout the Mekong Region and are important animals in the life of local communities. Yet another possibility is that these stories may be influenced by mythologies coming from other regions. This could be another topic warranting further investigation.

#### **4. Final Remarks**

Much has probably been lost in the 17 stories in Part II through translation across several languages. Our grasp of the local contexts may still not be enough to fully appreciate the value of these and the other stories. We had to ask villagers to tell their stories in rather unusual settings. They often had to talk into a microphone and in the presence of strangers who they knew did not understand the language they were speaking. When storytelling is perceived as performance, such factors must have affected the tellers and therefore the stories they told. A more radical view is that a story may exist only once, and taking a story out of its immediate context by recording and documenting it may risk spoiling its vitality.

For these reasons, the 17 stories in Part II, as well as the rest of the collected stories, may be approximations at best. That said, they still comprise a rich data base as can be seen through this preliminary analysis and each of the stories in the following section.

As a next step of this project, we are planning to use this data set to develop environmental education materials to answer the questions we began with in more comprehensive ways. In the meantime, we hope that this booklet serves as a guide, and that readers will have an opportunity to visit local communities in the Mekong Region, and listen to such stories themselves.



# PART II

PEOPLE'S STORIES IN RURAL CAMBODIA,  
LAOS AND THAILAND





# STORIES FROM BUNONG COMMUNITIES IN NORTHEASTERN CAMBODIA

Bunong, also known and spelled as Mnong, Phnong and so forth, is one of the Bahnaric languages in the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family. Bunong people live mostly in Vietnam and the northeastern provinces of Kratie, Mondulhiri and Ratanakiri in Cambodia. The estimated population of Bunong people in Cambodia is 37,500 (in 2008 census). The language is still actively used among Bunong speakers (Lewis et al. 2015).





# ORIGIN OF ELEPHANTS

# ORIGIN OF ELEPHANTS

*This story was told by Mr. Chhot Pich and his sister on 20 October 2014. Mr. Chhot Pich was living in Bouraing Village, Bousra Commune, Picheada District in Mondulkiri Province.*

Elephants were originally relatives to humans. Elephants were not born in the present shape of elephants. So they still love humans and are willing to be caught by humans. They have lived with and served humans until now.



Once upon a time, a group of villagers went fishing. They poisoned fish so that they could easily catch them. They collected the poisoned fish. They all ate the fish, except for one woman, who had a baby and was busy breast-feeding. She did not eat the fish.

After having eaten the fish, the villagers were transformed into elephants. They could still understand and speak the human language, however. They went back to the village and told their families why they had become elephants. They then continued to live with their families as before.

Brahma remained angry with the villagers who had poisoned the river and become elephants. He took a pestle and hit the mouths of the elephants. This made them unable to speak. However, they were still able to understand the human language

as before. They still ate rice and soup and drank alcohol as humans, too. They had the knowledge of traditional medicine and led their families to find medical herbs. They also dragged logs, helped humans in agricultural work, and carried them from place to place. Sometimes, they even took care of their human families.

The elephants also gave birth to baby elephants. Many years went by. The next generation of elephants did not know about their origin. They did not get along well with their human relatives anymore. So they went to live in a forest and started eating tree leaves instead of rice and soup.

Today, when humans need to find elephants for help in agricultural work, they have to hunt for them in the forest. As elephants have originated from humans, they can still eat human food. They regard humans as their master and obey and serve them. They accompany humans to catch young elephants, too.







# HISTORY OF KEO SEIMA DISTRICT



## HISTORY OF KEO SEIMA DISTRICT

*This story was told by Mr. Keo Pleuy and his wife Ms. Tet Yet on 19 October 2014. Mr. Keo Pleuy was 80 years old and living in Lao Ka Village, Sen Monorom, the capital city of Mondulakiri Province.*

A long time ago, villagers found glassy rocks on a mountain which looked like crystal and glimmered in multiple colors like a diamond. They were beautiful. The villagers called the rock *keo seima*, or magic glass.

The area on the mountain was where villagers grazed their cattle. The cattle would never get lost. The villagers always prayed to the spirit to take care of their cattle. Whenever there were any lost cattle, the villagers prayed to the spirit for their return, and a few days later the cattle would come back.

So the area became a sacred place for the villagers. When the villagers became ill, they offered pig or chicken blood, burned incense and candles, and wished for happiness. The area became the place where the villagers held religious ceremonies and celebrations.

The villagers of that generation were ancestors of the Bunong. At night, virtuous villagers dreamed of the spirit who told them about magic glass coming from a rock, and how they could find and collect it. The villagers then went to collect magic glass. Some placed it on a shelf at home, and others kept it in a bag to worship. Those who had magic glass always enjoyed good luck, not only for themselves, but also for their entire family, and even their animals.

When there was a ceremony in the village, those who had magic glass brought it to the sacred place to worship. After finishing the ceremony, they took it back to their house. They named the place where they had collected magic glass as Keo Seima. It was situated in the forest at Prey Ochhloung. Later, the place came to be called Keo Seima District. The forest is now in Sre Preah Commune, Keo Seima District in Mondulkiri Province.

During the regime of Pol Pot, all the magic glass rocks were confiscated and therefore can no longer be seen these days.





# STORIES FROM KMHMU' PEOPLE IN CENTRAL AND NORTHERN LAOS



The Kmhmu'<sup>1</sup> are one of the original, old lines of indigenous inhabitants of Laos. Linguistically, the Kmhmu' belong to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family. There are currently about 70,000 Kmhmu' living in the Lao PDR, Northern Vietnam, Xichuang Panna (Sipsong Panna) Prefecture in China and the border region of Thailand (Simana and Preisig 2006: 1). The population of Kmhmu' in Laos is estimated to be about 610,000, which equals 11 percent of the total population of the country (DoS-MPI 2005).

The Kmhmu' depend mainly on agriculture, especially shifting cultivation, and supplementary hunting, fishing and collecting non-timber forest products (NTFPs). To the

Kmhmu' people, forests are where they live and obtain food, as well as the base of culture and religion (Simana and Preisig 1998; 2006). The Kmhmu' have long histories of conducting shifting cultivation and have a rich knowledge about forests. They have long collected NTFPs and utilize them in various ways, including for subsistence and generating income. The Kmhmu' believe that the world can be divided into human and spirit spheres, and that people belong to both (Simana and Preisig 1998: 7).

This section introduces four Kmhmu' folktales from Central and Northern Laos about forest resources and spirits which have been handed down from their ancestors.





# A CIVET CAT

# A CIVET CAT

**Illustrations by Khanhkeo Simana**

*This story was told by Tanaly at Khone Keo Village, Hin Heup District in Vientiane Province on 12 October 2014. It explains the origin of a sing mong, or a sing ngaen mong, or a civet cat. Kmhmu' people in some communities also title the story "Grandma Tid Tieng." Tid tieng means to be stuck in bed.*

A long time ago, there lived a boy and a girl who loved each other very much and were betrothed to get married. Unfortunately, however, the boy, Pho Ja Rang, had to serve a three-year military assignment. He told the girl that he would marry her after his mission.

The girl waited for a long time for the boy to return to her. However, she became very sick and eventually died. Her relatives and other villagers tried to bury her in a forest, but strangely, they could not move her body. It was stuck to the mattress and bed. The villagers became scared. So they decided to move the village instead, and left her body there.

Pho Ja Rang completed his mission in three years and came back to his village. He arrived at the village in the evening and saw his girlfriend's house. So he hurried to the house. He got there and opened the door. It was very dark inside. He asked his girlfriend to turn on the light. She then told him, "Do so yourself. If I do, you will be afraid of me."

However, she turned on the light after all, as she did not want to upset Pho Ja Rang. They then talked with each other as they used to. Suddenly, though, he noticed that she was not normal. He realized that she had already died and become a ghost. So, he decided to run away. He told her to wait for a while as he was going to pee. She did not let him go, however. Pho Ja Rang kept asking many times. She finally allowed him to go.



When Pho Ja Rang went out of the house, he caught a louse and left it at a nearby house. He said to the louse, "If someone calls my name, please say 'I am here'." He also picked up a kettle full of water and turned it upside down. The water came out from the kettle, which made the noise as if he was peeing.

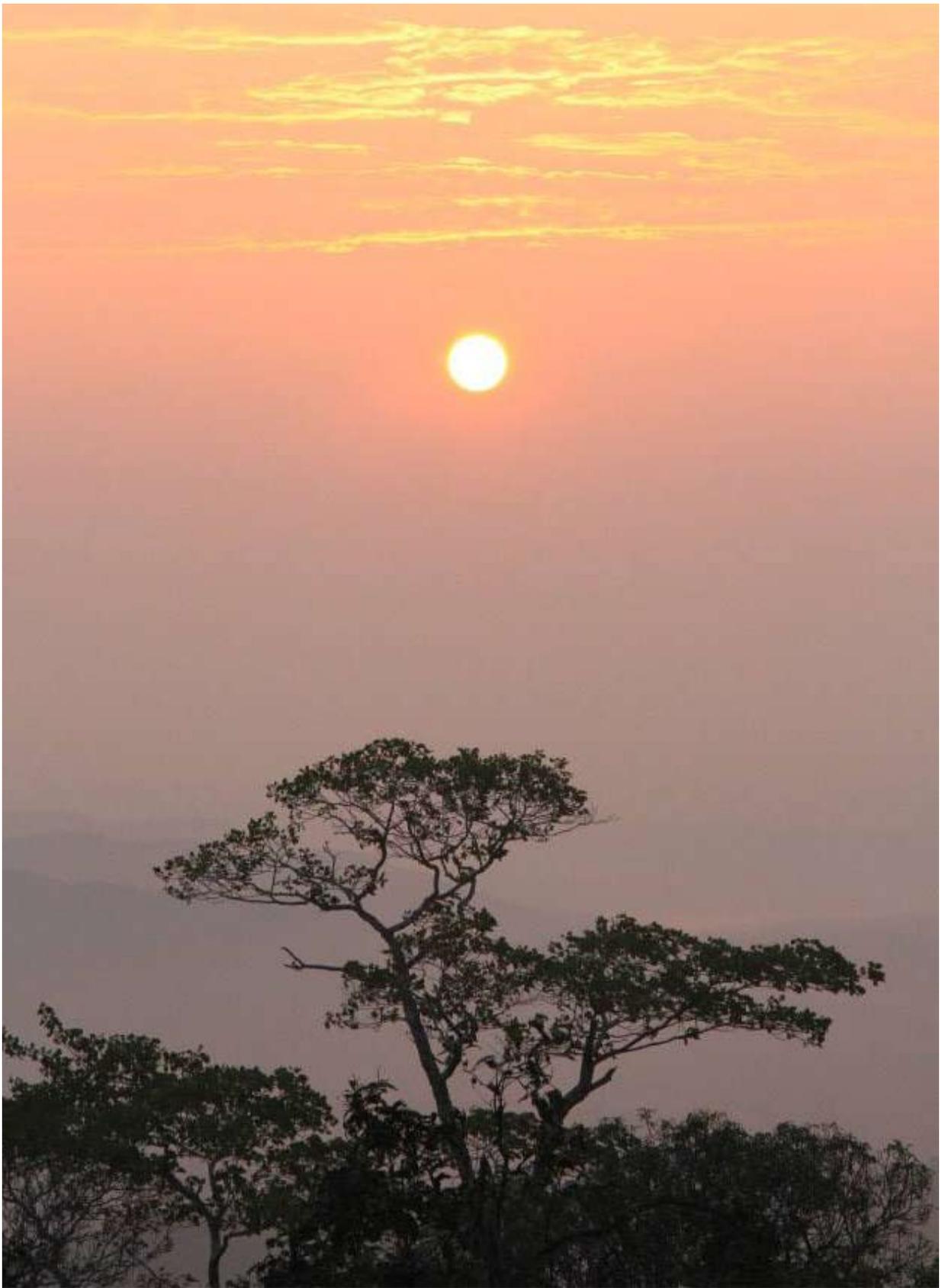
Pho Ja Rang ran and escaped into a forest. Soon after, the ghost started calling him, "Pho Ja Rang!" "I am here," replied the louse. Every time she called Pho Ja Rang, she heard the same answer. So she went out to find him. She found the louse and the kettle instead. She went searching for him with the bed stuck on her back, saying, "Pho Ja Rang is mine! Pho Ja Rang is mine!"

Pho Ja Rang kept running in the forest but became very tired. He stopped at a *som fard*, or a sour tree, and found a *ngaen mong*, or a civet cat, there. He asked the cat to help him. The cat told him to take off all his clothes and hide in a hollow of the tree. The civet cat then put on Pho Ja Rang's clothes.

The ghost came. When she saw Pho Ja Rang, she became very happy. She touched him and danced with him. She said, "These clothes belong to Pho Ja Rang. But you have paws and feet like a civet cat." She kept saying, "My boyfriend! My boyfriend!" The ghost and the civet cat danced for a little while. However, in the end, the civet cat bit the ghost's neck. The ghost died.

Pho Ja Rang and all his family and relatives thanked the civet cat for the great help. He considered the civet cat as a great fortune of his family. He promised not to kill or eat civet cats and respected them. Pho Ja Rang and his family believed that they would lose their teeth and their skin would be burned if they ate the meat of civet cats. They also decided not to use *som fard* to make a pillar for a house or a rice storage, because they were afraid that it would bring about misfortune, such as wasted rice, sickness or death.







# BROTHER RUI, SOURCE OF LICE

## BROTHER RUI, SOURCE OF LICE

*This story was told by Xiengvilay Oulaythone at Na Sao Nang Village, Hin Heup District in Vientiane Province on 11 October 2014. Ai means “brother”. So, Ai Rui is Brother Rui.*

There once lived a woman. She had a son but no husband. Her son was extremely lazy. He relied on his mother for living. One day, his mother passed away. So he became an orphan. He became poor and dirty. Villagers started calling him Ai Rui, or Haeng Bor Hao, a source of lice.

The villagers hated Ai Rui. They told him to leave the village and stay away. So he had to build a shack near the village and lived there. He had to make his own living by practicing *hed hai*, or upland cultivation. No one wanted contact with Ai Rui because he was dirty. He was really a source of lice. The villagers made fun of him and discriminated against him. He was often isolated and had to eat alone whenever he joined village activities.

One day, the village was told to help the district governor plant seeds in an upland field. Ai Rui was told to help with the work, too. There were many termite mounds in the upland field. It was very difficult to dig a hole for seeding because the soil was very hard. Ai Rui was told to seed where there were termite mounds. The district governor’s daughter noticed this and became sympathetic to Ai Rui. She came close to help him, but she was also afraid of touching him. She stayed away from Ai Rui.

Ai Rui could not make a hole in the termite mounds. So he seeded around them. But when he broke one termite mound, he found silver and gold. It was very lucky of him. He wanted to show it to the governor’s daughter. So he called her. However, she would not come because she did not trust him. Ai Rui then said, “If you do not believe me or feel disgusted by me, it is fine. I will move aside. You can come and see it then.”



Ai Rui moved a little bit. The governor's daughter came and found a lot of silver and gold there. She and Ai Rui decided to take all the silver and gold and hide it in Ai Rui's shack during a lunch break. After having finished the seeding, the governor's daughter did not return home but stayed at Ai Rui's shack. The governor became speechless upon hearing that his daughter had not come back home. He let the two stay together, however.

The governor's daughter helped Ai Rui cut his hair, take a bath, and wash his clothes. She then stayed with Ai Rui for twenty days and finally returned to her father. She said to her father, "Father, if you want to eat bananas, please go and pick them up on the roof of Ai Rui's shack." But the governor did not listen to her. He ignored what she had said. On the seventh day, however, he changed his mind and could not ignore his daughter's words anymore. He went to Ai Rui's shack, took a stool, and climbed up on the roof. He looked down and saw silver and gold. He got down and washed the stool. He then left the shack as if nothing had happened.

After this incident, the villagers did not hesitate to help Ai Rui seed in the upland field. When finishing the work, Ai Rui offered the villagers *lao hai*, or traditional rice wine, for dinner. However, all the villagers brought their own bamboo straw to drink *lao hai* because they were still worried if Ai Rui's *lao hai* was clean. To their surprise, however, they saw golden straws with the *lao hai*. The villagers felt embarrassed. They threw away their bamboo straws on the ground under Ai Rui's shack.

The district governor allowed his daughter to marry Ai Rui. The two lived happily together. Firewood found on the ground these days comes from the bamboo straws for drinking *lao hai*, which the villagers had thrown away.





**PHO YAL**

# PHO YAL

*This story was told by Maitha Sengaloun at Khone Keo Village, Hin Heup District in Vientiane Province on 12 October 2014. Yal is a name of the main character in the story. It is a funny story, which consists of a number of episodes, including that of Pho Yal working in a rice field, practicing swidden agriculture, making a hut in the rice field, hunting a deer, delivering deer meat to his uncle, and working as a volunteer soldier. The following are two episodes. One is about Yai working in a rice field; the other about Yai hunting a deer.*

A long time ago, there lived some girls. They caught fish in a stream. On their way home, one girl got left behind because she was slow. She saw a tree with a beautiful shape and said to the tree, “You are so beautiful. If you were a human, I would marry you.” The tree answered, “If you want me, you can measure and cut me as you wish.” So she cut the tree and then it became a man. He married her. The man came to be known as Pho Yal.





Yal and his wife lived together until the season for swidden agriculture came. All the farmers in the village went to work on a rice field. Pho Yal's wife said to him, "Today, you must do swidden agriculture in our rice field." So Yal left home with a big knife and an axe and headed for the rice field. When he arrived there, he took out the axe to cut a tree. But the tree asked Yal not to cut it. Yal accepted the request and did not cut the tree. When Yal returned home in the evening, his wife asked him, "Did you finish cutting trees and clearing the field?" Yal answered, "Yes, I did."

However, when Yal's wife went to the rice field the next day, she found that it was not cleared. So she had to tell him again to cut the trees. Yal's wife said to him, "Burn the dead trees. If the wind comes from the head of the field, set the fire at the head. If the wind comes from the foot, set the fire at the foot." Yal went to the rice field. The wind blew on his head. So he set the fire on his head. The wind then shifted and blew to his feet. So he set the fire at his feet. Yal had his head and feet totally burned when he came back home. His wife asked him, "Did you burn it well?" Yal answered, "Burn it well or not, come and see me here." She saw the wounds on Yal's head and feet. She then went to clear the rice field for herself.

The wife found a dead civet cat in the rice field and decided to take it home. She stopped by the river to take a bath. She put the civet cat on the ground, took off her clothes, and left them next to the body of the civet cat. Yal came to the river to fetch water. He then saw the burned civet cat and his wife's clothes. He thought that her wife had also died. So he took her clothes back home.

When she finished bathing, Yal's wife could not find her clothes. She had to hide herself in a bush until it got dark. However, when she came back home with the dead civet cat, the door was locked and she could not enter the house. Yal's wife asked him to open the door. Yal said, "You have already died! Please do not come to frighten me." The wife got angry and

so broke the door to enter the house. Yal got scared and jumped out of the house. After a while, Yal returned home, when his wife had finished cooking the civet cat for dinner.

The season to plant rice came. Yal's wife asked him to find an elbow-shaped tree to poke holes in the soil to plant rice. Yal thought that his wife wanted him to catch a deer to use its leg to poke holes. So he went to a forest to catch a deer. It was a very easy task for him because he was able to communicate with trees in the forest. Trees were his friends. They helped him corner a deer and he caught it quite easily.

Yal took a leg, meat and some inner parts from the deer and brought them home. He carried the deer meat along a stream. When Yal heard the sound of frogs, he thought that they were asking for the meat. So he threw a small piece of meat into the stream whenever he heard frogs. The meat was quickly gone. Yal said, "Hey, frogs, I do not have enough meat. The only piece left is a lung." He then threw the deer's lung into the stream but it did not sink. Seeing this, Yal said, "Oh, you are full now." When Yal's wife saw him come home with a deer leg, she wondered why he had no meat. She asked Yal, "Where is the meat?" Yal replied, "I gave it to everyone who asked for it on my way back here." Yal and his wife had to go back to the stream to get back the meat.

After having come back home with the deer meat, Yal's wife divided it into small pieces to give to their relatives. One of the pieces was for their uncle. Yal's wife asked him to deliver the meat to their uncle and said to him, "If Uncle asks what kind of meat, tell him that it is deer meat."

Yal left home with the meat. On the way, he became thirsty. So, he drank water from a stream. He started to hear a sound of the water flowing and splashing around rocks, “*jork, jork*”. When he heard the sound, he forgot what kind of meat he was carrying. So he went back home to ask his wife. His wife told him that it was deer meat. This time, Yal tried to remember it by heart while walking to his uncle’s house. So he kept saying to himself, “Deer meat, deer meat, deer meat,” until he stopped to drink water from the stream one more time. He then forgot again what kind of meat he was carrying. He went back home and asked his wife for the second time.

Yal finally got to his uncle’s house and gave the meat to his uncle. His uncle asked Yal, “What kind of meat is this?” When Yal tried to recall it, a bird came flying and made a sound, “*Arng, arng.*” This helped Yal recall it. He said to his uncle, “Deer meat!”

Yal stayed at his uncle’s house that night. He then returned home with clothes that his uncle and aunt had given him. On his way back home, he found a squirrel and a mouse trapped by villagers. He thought that they were feeling cold. So he tore the clothes into pieces and covered the squirrel and the mouse with them. When he got back home, his wife asked, “What did your uncle and aunt give to you?” Yal answered, “They gave me clothes.” His wife asked once again, “Where are they?” Yal said, “I gave them to children who were feeling very cold.” Yal and his wife went back where he had found a squirrel and a mouse, got back the pieces of the clothes, and brought them back home. Yal’s wife then sewed them into a *sine* or traditional skirt. She wore the *sine* that night. Yal found it beautiful. So he asked all the young boys to come to his house and see his wife.







# THE OWL AND THE DEER

## THE OWL AND THE DEER

*In Pakbeng District of Oudomxay Province in Northern Laos, the Kmhmu' account for a large proportion of the population. Among the indigenous tribes currently living in Laos, the Kmhmu' are said to have lived there the longest. The typical lifestyle of the Kmhmu' people is based on agriculture, particularly rice production in swidden fields, which is supplemented with hunting, fishing and gathering in the forests and rivers.*

*Auntie Toop, one of the older residents of Chom Leng Noy Village in Pakbeng District, is the village's leading storyteller of tales from olden times. Having become too old to go out to the swidden fields, she spends her time looking after small children, feeding chickens, and gathering vegetables in the nearby forests.*

*The old tales recounted by Auntie Toop always feature a variety of plants and animals. In the tale, "The Owl and the Deer" below, wild animals such as the owl, the deer, the elephant, the snake and the bat, as well as farm animals such as the chicken and the pig, all play a part along with people and even a dragon.<sup>2</sup> A banana tree growing wild in the forest makes an appearance, and so does a pumpkin, perhaps raised by people in a swidden field. In the folktales of the Kmhmu', listeners experience a glimpse of the world that surrounds these people who have deep connections with their natural environment of forests and rivers, and the inner workings of their lives.*

One day, an owl invited a deer to go fishing with him.<sup>3</sup> When they reached the river together, the owl chose a small side stream and the deer chose a larger one, and they used woven baskets to scoop up fish from their respective streams. The deer caught lots of fish, crayfish and other things.



The owl, however, did not catch anything at all. The owl, who was getting hungry, turned to the deer and said, “Hey, Mr. Deer. If you go upstream, you can catch even more fish.” The deer said, “Really? In that case, I will go up a little and come back in a while.”

The deer left his catch behind and went upstream. When the deer had gone far enough that he could no longer be seen, the owl ate up all of the fish the deer had gathered. When the deer returned, he could not find any of the catch he had painstakingly gathered. The only thing that remained was the crayfish that the owl had left uneaten. Realizing that he had been deceived, the deer stamped around in a rage. When he did that, he accidentally caught his hoof on a pumpkin vine, and the pumpkin went rolling down the slope.

The pumpkin’s course took it straight to where an old woman was tending a fire to boil water. The pumpkin hit the pot, knocking it over and spilled boiling water onto the old woman’s legs. The old woman, upset at having been showered with hot water, beat on a drum that was nearby. A chicken, surprised at the sound of the drum, ran around crying out loudly, and knocked over a pole (used for making holes in the soil when sowing rice) that had been left standing. The falling pole hit a snake. Startled, the snake took off in a mad dash. The panicking snake slithered over an anthill, demolishing it.



The ants in the ruined anthill came rushing out all at once at a pig that was nearby and bit him in the mouth. Bitten by the ants, the pig tried to shake them off, and rubbed his mouth on a banana tree. The pig rubbed his mouth so hard that he knocked the banana tree over. A bat sleeping in the banana tree was startled by this. Flying off in a panic, the bat flew into an elephant's ear. In turn, the elephant was startled. He kicked a branch that had fallen from a tree and sent it flying. The fallen branch pierced the eyes of a dragon-child that was swimming in the river. Upon hearing her child crying because of his injured eyes, the mother dragon came rushing out in a panic.

The mother dragon said, "Good Heavens! What's the matter?" "A tree branch came flying and poked my eyes," said the young dragon. "Mr. Tree Branch! Why did you go and pierce my child's eyes?" The tree branch said, "Because I was kicked by the elephant. So I went flying." "Mr. Elephant! Why did you kick the tree branch?" "Because the bat suddenly flew into my ear, and I was startled." "Mr. Bat! Why did you fly into the elephant's ear?" "Because

the banana tree in which I was hanging fell over.” “Mr. Banana Tree! Why did you fall over?” “Because the pig rubbed his mouth on me.” “Mr. Pig! Why did you rub your mouth on the banana tree?” “Because the ants were biting me in the mouth.”

“Ants! Why were you biting the pig?” “Because the snake destroyed our anthill.” “Mr. Snake! Why did you destroy the anthill?” “Because I was suddenly struck by a falling pole.” “Mr. Pole! Why did you fall over on the snake?” “Because the chicken bumped into me.” “Mrs. Chicken! Why did you bump into the pole?” “Because the old woman suddenly started beating the drum.” “Old Woman! Why did you beat the drum?” “Because I was surprised when the pot overturned, pouring hot water on my legs.” “Mr. Pot! Why did you overturn?” “Because the pumpkin came rolling down the slope.”

“Mr. Pumpkin! Why did you roll down the slope?” “Because the deer uprooted my vine.” “Mr. Deer! Why did you uproot the pumpkin vine?” “Because the owl stole my catch and I got angry.” Finally, the mother dragon arrived at the owl. “Mr. Owl! Why did you steal the deer’s catch?”

The owl could not think of a clever explanation. Unable to respond, he looked all around with his big eyes. The dragon said, “You are to blame. Because of you, my child’s eyes were damaged. To replace them, I will take your eyes.” The dragon pulled out the owl’s eyeballs and placed them in her child’s sockets. To replace the owl’s eyes, she used the seeds of a fruit called *salaen*, which allowed him to see only at night. This is how the crafty owl lost his ability to see by day.







# STORIES FROM SIPHANDON IN SOUTHERN LAOS

The name “Siphandon” refers to about 4,000 (*siphan* in Lao) islands (*don*) in the Mekong River located in Khong District of Champasak Province in Southern Laos. In this area, near the Cambodian border, the Mekong spreads to a width of about 14 kilometers with all manner of large and small islands and cascades emerging from the river. The Mekong boasts the world’s largest freshwater fishery, and the Siphandon area supports people’s livelihoods with abundant aquatic resources. Less than 100 Irrawaddy Dolphins, commonly known as Mekong River Dolphins, an endangered species, also live here (WWF).

The area was ruled by the Kingdom of Champasak from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under that dynasty, the Lao version of the Ramayana (*Phra Lak Phra Lam*) was disseminated, and stories inscribed on *bailan* (manuscript materials made from palm leaves, used for recording Buddhist tales and other narratives) are still found at temples in the area. “The Legend of the Water Buffalo King” in this section derives from the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*.





SOMPAMIT WATERFALL AND  
THE TALE OF THE  
DOLPHIN

# SOMPHAMIT WATERFALL AND THE TALE OF THE DOLPHIN

*This story was told in Lao language by Mr. Khampheuan Keokeanchan on 9 September 2014. Mr. Khampheuan was living in Hang Khone Village, Khong District in Champasak Province.*

*In the village of Hang Khone, where farming, fishing and tourism provide the main means of making a living, the tale of the endangered Irrawaddy Dolphin and the sida bird continues to be told. Dolphin watching tours by boat are a big source of income, but for the past several decades serious changes have been occurring in the environment surrounding the village. Because of illegal fishing and other factors, there has been a drastic decrease in numbers of the kind of dolphin that appears in the tale, and the sida bird is also rarely seen anymore.*

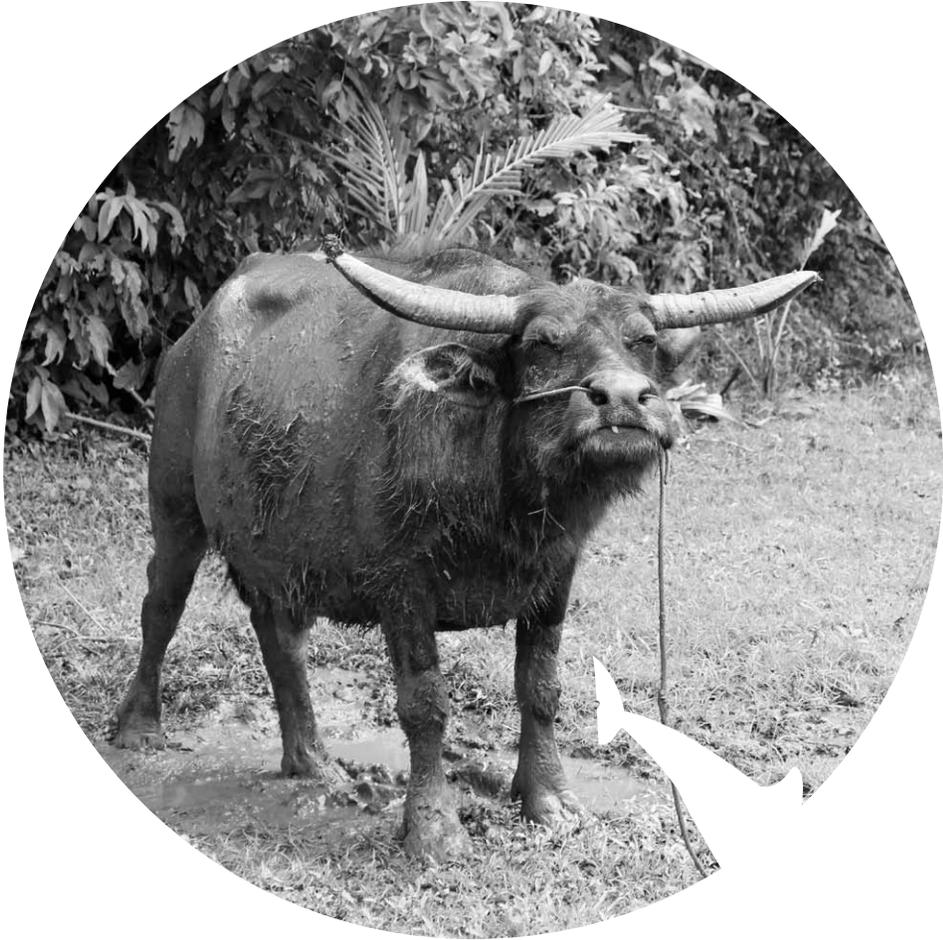
Once upon a time, a man and his wife set forth seeking new lands where food would be abundant. The man's name was Kha, and his wife's name was Sida. The couple built a bamboo raft and set out together with a chicken, a duck, a *kiyat* (small frog), a frog, an *ian* bird and a peacock.

They descended the Mekong River on the raft, approaching close to Somphamit Waterfall. Kha and Sida asked each of the animals whether they should continue going ahead as they were, but the chicken cried, "*Jort! Jort! Jort!*" meaning, "Stop!" The duck cried, "*Wa! Wa! Wa!*" meaning, "To the bank!" The frog cried, "*Leuk! Leuk! Leuk!*" meaning, "It's deep!"<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the couple asked the peacock, who was the largest of the animals, and he cried, "*Baewon! Baewon! Baewon!*" meaning, "Go on!" Kha and *Sida* took the advice of the peacock, since he was big, and proceeded further aboard the raft. Then, they went over Somphamit Waterfall and lost their lives. After that, the man was reborn as an Irrawaddy Dolphin, or *pa kha* in Lao language, and his wife as a *sida* bird.

Even now, when dolphins chase fish, *sida* birds come down to eat the fish, and they can be seen living harmoniously together. At the same time, the dolphins and *sida* birds are both said to reside upstream from Somphamit Waterfall, and never try to approach the place where they previously lost their lives.







THE LEGEND OF  
THE WATER BUFFALO  
**KING**

# THE LEGEND OF THE WATER BUFFALO KING

*This story was told in Lao language by Mr. Nuxuay Kommasith on 8 September 2014. Mr. Nuxuay was 54 years old and the chief of Tholathi Village, Khong District in Champasak Province.*

*Tholathi Island, one of the Siphandon, or four thousand islands, of Champasak Province is a peaceful island where villagers live mainly by fishing and cultivating paddy fields. It is said that Tholathi Island was once known by the disturbing name of "Tholaphi (patricide) Island." The origin of that name conceals the legend of Water Buffalo King, the ruler of the Siphandon, which has been handed down on Tholathi and the surrounding islands. Even now, the villagers of Tholathi Island observe the taboo that water buffalos and cattle must not be killed.*

*About 20 years ago, a fish conservation zone was set up with the support of an overseas organization in the area surrounding the Tholaphi Cave, the scene of the tale. The village headman reports that the water buffalo legend has played an important role to the protection of the fish in the conservation zone up to today. This is aided by the fact that the zone has contributed to the conservation of fish as, for example, a spawning ground.*

*Further, it is said that this story derives from an episode in the Phra Lak Phra Lam, the version of the Indian epic poem Ramayana that was transmitted to Laos.*

A long time ago, in Siphandon, there lived Water Buffalo King who had many wives and children. Fearing that his position might be threatened, the king killed all the male calves one by one as soon as they were born.

One time, however, a mother buffalo gave birth to a male calf in a cave. As she was afraid that her son would be killed, she reared the calf secretly in the cave so that her husband, Water Buffalo King, would not find him. She brought him up to be strong in order to be able to resist his father.

One day, the son said to his mother, “I am now quite strong enough and want to fight my father.” But the mother buffalo rejected her son’s request, saying, “My son, you are far from being ready yet. You must train much more if you want to surpass your father.”

The son then crossed to another island in order to train for the bout with his father, and when he rammed his horns against the tree called *som mo*, which grew on the island and which had the ability to confer supernatural powers, the tree swayed and a large number of small fruits rained down on him. When the mother buffalo saw that her son was able to pierce each and every one of the small fruits with his horns before they reached the ground, she was convinced that he now had sufficient strength to duel with Water Buffalo King. The island where the son trained has become known as Det (supernatural power) Island.

Eventually, the father and the son met in the cave where the son was born. Water Buffalo King was surprised and angry to find that there was a grown water buffalo bull alive, and the duel between the two began immediately. However, they were very evenly matched and it was hard for either one of them to conquer the other.

Water Buffalo King asked, “Who on earth did you learn your power from?” The son replied, “I inherited my strength from you.” When the son asked his father, “So, who did you learn from?” the father answered, “My power came down to my horns from heaven. I have no master.”

At the end of the furious battle between the father and the son, the water buffalo son at last threw his father to the floor of the cave. Thereafter, this cave has been known as Tholaphi (patricide) Cave, which is said to actually exist near Tholathi Island below the water’s surface in the bed of the Mekong River.





# STORIES FROM AKHA PEOPLE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Akha is one of the languages belonging to Sino-Tibetan language family. It is reported that between 200,000 and 240,000 Akha speakers live in Burma/Myanmar and in Yunnan Province of Southwestern China, respectively. The Akha also live in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The total population of Akha people is estimated to be 563,960.

The following four stories are from among those by Akha people living in Chiang Rai Province of Thailand. The total number of Akha speakers living in Thailand is estimated to be 56,600. They live mostly in the northern provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son. The language, written in different scripts, is actively used among Akha speakers. Many Akha people are Christian (Bradley 2007).







MO HUE  
AND  
MON YI

## MO HUE AND MON YI

*The following stories were told by Mr. Amui Cemui on 8 and 9 October 2014. Mr. Amui was 64 years old and living in Ya Nam Village, Huay Mae Sray Sub-district in Chiang Rai Province. The first two are part of a much longer story about two brothers, Mo Hue and Mon Yi. Mon Yi ended up killing his older brother, Mo Hue, towards the end of the story (Phichai n.d.).*

A long, long time ago, there lived two brothers. The older brother's name was Mo Hue and the younger brother's name was Mon Yi. They were living in an old cabin with a very aged father. The father was not able to take care of himself. He had to have someone to serve him food and water. Even when he defecated and urinated, he always had to have someone to help him.

Mo Hue and Mon Yi talked with each other, "Our father gave life to both of us. We should not kill him, though we feel that we really cannot take care of him by ourselves." They agreed that it would be better to take their father and sell him so that they could obtain some cash to support their family.

Mo Hue and Mon Yi made a stretcher, put their father on it, and carried him on the road. After they had walked for a while, they felt tired and thirsty. So they put their father down at the foot of a banyan tree. The two brothers then went down to get water to drink. When they sat and took a rest at the banyan tree, they saw a long-tailed bird, a flycatcher, feeding her babies in a nest in the tree.

Mo Hue and Mon Yi's father pointed at the bird and said, "Mo Hue and Mon Yi, my sons, your father is old now. I cannot take care of myself and you cannot take care of me. So you are now taking me to sell. See the bird feeding her children that she has given birth to. She has to take care of them until they grow up."

Having heard their father talking this way, Mo Hue and Mon Yi recalled, “When we were little children, our father took good care of us. He served us food and water like that for sure.” The two brothers felt deeply sorry for their father and decided to carry him back home. Mo Hue and Mon Yi took good care of their father. They served him rice and fish, made warm water to bathe him and wipe his body, and kept him at home so that he would not have to go out.

Many years passed. Mo Hue and Mon Yi’s father said to the two brothers, “Mo Hue and Mon Yi, I would like to take a bath in the river. I feel that my nails are too long and I would like to cut them.” The two listened to their father’s request and took him to the river. They then left him at a boat dock by himself and came back home to do some errands.

When Mo Hue and Mon Yi thought that the father had already finished bathing, they went back to the dock to bring him home. The two brothers were very surprised, however, because their father had disappeared. No matter how hard they searched, they could not find him. Mo Hue and Mon Yi felt very sad.







SEARCHING FOR A

# NEW LAND

## SEARCHING FOR A NEW LAND

*Mo Hue and Mon Yi believed that their father had been kidnapped by Naga and set out to look for him. Mo Hue went upstream in his gold boat, while Mon Yi went downstream in his silver boat. Mon Yi then saved the life of a king's daughter. The king offered Mon Yi silver, gold and jewelry for saving his daughter. However, Mon Yi declined and asked for a rooster instead. He declared, "When this rooster crows, that is where our God wants me to build my home" and travelled on.*

Mon Yi arrived at one place where the landscape was beautiful and the water plentiful. There were betel trees and a lot of loud sounds from wild animals. The land was very much ready for use. Mon Yi really wanted to build his home here and put the rooster on a branch of a tree to see if it would crow. Alas, however, the rooster was completely silent.

Mon Yi said to himself, "Our God does not allow me to build a home here." So he went on. He travelled for seven days and seven nights and felt extremely exhausted. He sat down and took a rest. The place was full of rocks of various kinds, as well as rocky and steep mountains. The land was not appropriate for planting anything. However, the rooster did crow here.

Mon Yi said to himself, "This is the land that satisfies our God." So he chose to stay. The rooster then crowed again, "Cock-a-doodle-doo. Without scooping, you will get good drinking water. Without planting, you will get long grain rice for eating. Cock-a-doodle-doo." The rooster crowed three more times and said, "The high rocky mountains will become a plateau. Everything will become as Mon Yi wishes."



Soon after the rooster stopped crowing, the steep mountains became a plateau. Mon Yi cast a spell and got various goods, silver, gold and jewelry, as much as they were needed.





HOW CATS  
CAME TO THE  
WORLD

# HOW CATS CAME TO THE WORLD

A long, long time ago, God created everything in the world, including various kinds of animals living in the rivers and mountains. However, he forgot to create cats. The world was full of dust. Rats were all over. They bothered humans. They ate all the vegetables and the humans could not harvest them. Rats also destroyed many things.



One day, the humans thought of consulting with God for a solution. They went to see God and said to him, “God.” God said, “What?” The humans said, “We cannot live.” God asked, “Why? What happened?” The humans said, “There are too many rats. They have destroyed our vegetables and other things. We want cats to chase them away.”

God thought for a while and put his scurf into three bamboo containers. God handed them to the humans and said, “Do not open them on your way back home.”

On their way back home, the humans asked themselves, “What did God give to us?” They became very curious to know what was inside the bamboo containers. They could not resist and opened one of them. Something jumped out and quickly ran away. The humans closed the container but it was too late.

They walked on and again became curious to know what was inside. They could not resist and opened another container. Again, something jumped out and ran away. The humans said to themselves, “We should not open the third container and look inside. If we open it before getting back home, we will not be able to get a cat.”

The humans managed to get back home without opening the last container. After having arrived at home, they opened it and found a cat inside. This is how God created cats out of his scurf and gave them to humans. Since then, we have had cats.







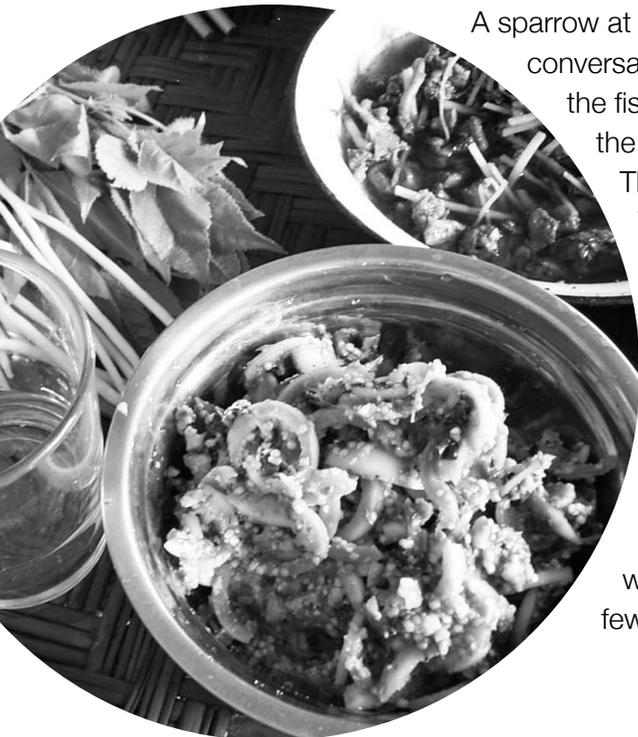
ORIGIN  
OF A  
SWING

# ORIGIN OF A SWING

Humans did not have a swing. How did it come to exist?

A long, long time ago, many fish lived in rivers and rice paddies. There was a village, and farmers lived there. When the farmers went to farm, they did not take anything to eat with them except for rice. They caught fish and ate them with rice.

This caused trouble for the fish. So two fish went to ask God to do something about the humans. They said, "God, please help us." God asked them, "Why do I need to help you?" The fish replied, "When the humans go farming, they catch us and eat us. We cannot stand it. We used to play in rivers and rice paddies. We have come to live here for a long time. However, we cannot survive anymore."



A sparrow at God's house happened to hear this conversation. He said that it was because the fish had done something wrong to the humans. So the humans got angry. The two fish said that it was not true. They said that the humans were causing them trouble. God did not know what to do.

God finally decided to make a swing and give it to the humans so that they could play. When they swung up, especially at the beginning of the rainy season, they would be away from the earth for a few days. The fish thought that God

had punished the humans and so became satisfied with what God had done. The two fish went back home.

There lived a brother and a sister. The brother's name was A Rong and the sister A Ong. They made a type of swing, too. The two played with it, swinging up and down and moving around as well. Back in those days, the sun and the moon did not keep time. They came out when they felt like rising. Sometimes, neither the sun nor the moon came out for four or five days. Then, when they were up in the sky, they did not go down for two to three days.

This was a problem. Humans did not know when to farm. They could not tell what season it was. A Rong and A Ong felt sorry for this and decided to talk with the sun and the moon to do something about it. So they cut bamboo trees and made a swing. They rode on the swing, swung up and down, and finally flew up into the sky.

A Rong got to the sun and asked the sun to come out on time. The sun agreed. But it was too hot and so A Rong died. A Ong reached the moon and asked the moon to come out on time. The moon agreed. But it was too cold and so A Ong died, too.

Since then, the sun and the moon have come out on time. Making a swing is to remember about A Rong and A Ong, who sacrificed themselves for humans.





# STORIES FROM NORTHEASTERN THAILAND



The northeastern region of Thailand is more popularly known as Isan. Isan originates from a Sanskrit word meaning “north east direction.” The word began to be used extensively at the beginning of the 20th century to refer to the entire region. Isan is Thailand’s largest region and is located on the Khorat Plateau. It also borders the Mekong River. A number of important rivers, including the Songkhram and Mun, both major Mekong tributaries, and the Chi River, a Mun tributary, run through Isan.

Isan is home to several Mon-Khmer languages of the Austroasiatic family. The first story below was told in Thai So, which is a language belonging to the Katuic branch of Mon-Khmer languages. People who speak So live on both sides of the Mekong River, with about 118,000 on the Lao side and 70,000 on the Thailand side, especially in Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon Provinces. The language is still actively used. Thai So orthography has also been developed based on Thai scripts

and is used among speakers of the language (Lewis et al. 2015).

Isan is also home to some Tai-Kadai languages. The most notable Tai-Kadai language in Isan is Northeastern Thai, also known and spelled as Esarn, Isan, Isaan and so forth. It is a language of regional identity among Isan speakers and is used habitually in every domain of life in the region, including at home. The language is written in Thai script. The total population of Isan speakers is estimated to be around 15,000,000. At least 1,000,000 live in Bangkok (Lewis et al. 2015).

Three of the four stories below were told in Isan and are all about salt and the traditional salt industry in the region. Substantial, high-quality salt deposits can be found underground in Isan. Traditional small-scale salt production is still practiced. This salt is traded and widely used among Isan people for traditional cooking.





GREAT-GRANDFATHER  
JA KLAWA

# GREAT-GRANDFATHER JA KLAWA

Illustrations by Sanan Yaipangkaew

*This story was told by Mr. Sanan Yaipangkaew on 19 October 2014 in Thai So language. Mr. Sanan was 57 years old and living in Khok Muang Village, Na Pho Sub-district, Kusuman District in Sakon Nakhon Province.*

One day, Ao Ja Klawa, a great-grandfather of the *Thro*, went to cut a tree near a river. (Ao means “great-grandfather” in Thai So. *Thro* is how Thai So people call themselves.) Ao Ja Klawa carried an iron axe with him. The forest was dense with trees suitable to obtain materials for making a boat.

Ao Ja Klawa cut down a tree. It made a loud noise. The noise reached underwater where King Naga was living, and disturbed him. King Naga’s son, or Ja Rawa in Thai So, transformed himself into a banana tree on the riverbank and started to bother Ao Ja Klawa. A stem of the banana tree with ripe bananas fell towards Ao Ja Klawa, who was working in the forest. The yellow color of the bananas was from Ja Rawa’s crest.

Ao Ja Klawa could not tolerate it and suspected that supernatural power was involved. He said to himself, “If I do not do anything, it will disturb me.” So he threw the iron axe into the stem of the banana tree. It cut into Ja Rawa’s neck. Ja Rawa hurriedly escaped into the water but was injured with the iron axe. It had pierced his neck and could not be removed.



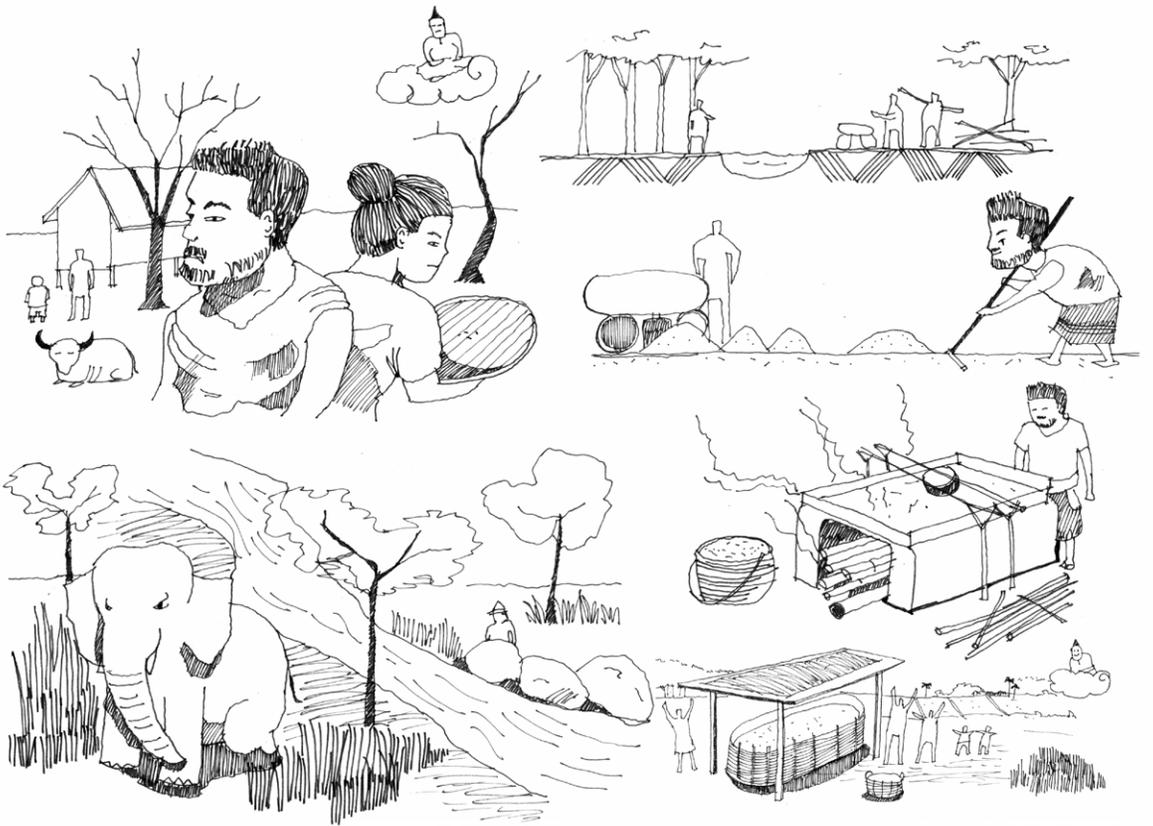


Ja Rawa's father, King Naga, came to learn the cause of the incident and told Ja Rawa to apologize to Ao Ja Klawa. King Naga then transformed himself into a human to look for Ao Ja Klawa. King Naga said, "Where is the great-grandfather? Where does he live?" Hearing this, Ao Ja Klawa replied, "It is my axe that is on your son's neck." Ao Ja Klawa then agreed to help Ja Rawa. Ao Ja Klawa and King Naga came to the riverbank. Ao Ja Klawa closed his eyes and counted to two. When he opened his eyes, he was at the city of King Naga.

Ao Ja Klawa saw Ja Rawa injured. He walked around Ja Rawa clockwise and chanted a mantra of healing in Thai So, saying, "*Muay ban pai mun suatapat ratad ratai ayat talong ja nonai o mo pieng.*" Ao Ja Klawa pulled the iron axe from Ja Rawa's neck. He then touched the big wound on his neck, and it immediately went away. Ja Rawa was healed.

King Naga held a feast to thank Ao Ja Klawa. They brought a lot of food, including big chickens and fish, and drinks for him. They also tied many threads around Ao Ja Klawa's wrists. Ao Ja Klawa then made an agreement with King Naga on behalf of the Thai So people. They agreed that if Nagas hear the Thai So language, Thai So descendants must be around. If they swim in the river, Nagas should not hurt or scare them. This is because Ao Ja Klawa helped cure Ja Rawa. If Nagas come up to the earth, humans will not harm them, either.

When Ao Ja Klawa came back to his village, he said to his children, "When you are in a river to catch fish and crabs or swim, say *muay bam pai Ao Ja Klawa na ja kreng*. This is to ask Nagas not to harm you." (The Thai So phrase says, "We are descendants of Ao Ja Klawa and are roaming.") Since then, Thai So people have lived and traveled on the water safely.





WHITE  
ELEPHANT  
PATH

# WHITE ELEPHANT PATH

Illustrations by Worajak Maneewong

*This story was told by Mr. Thongsin Thonkanya on 25 October 2014. Mr. Thongsin was 57 years old and living in Tha Yiam Village, Wang Luang Sub-district, Selaphum District in Roiet Province. The story was originally told by Mr. Kanha Phalaphon, a monk who was able to read the old text written on palm leaves.*

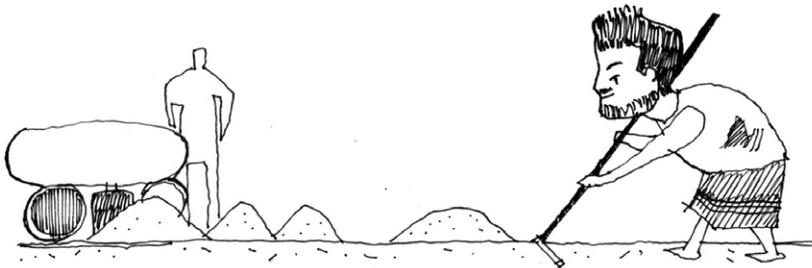
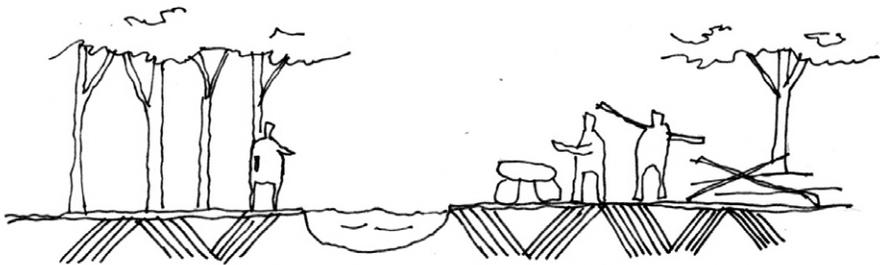
*The title of the story, "White Elephant Path" (Thang Chang Phuek in Isan), refers to the area which starts from Ubon Ratchathani Province, passes through Nakhon Ratchasima Province, and reaches Bangkok. The story symbolizes a large amount of salt reserve and traditional salt productions in the area. The story is also based on Jataka, which is about the previous lives of Buddha.*

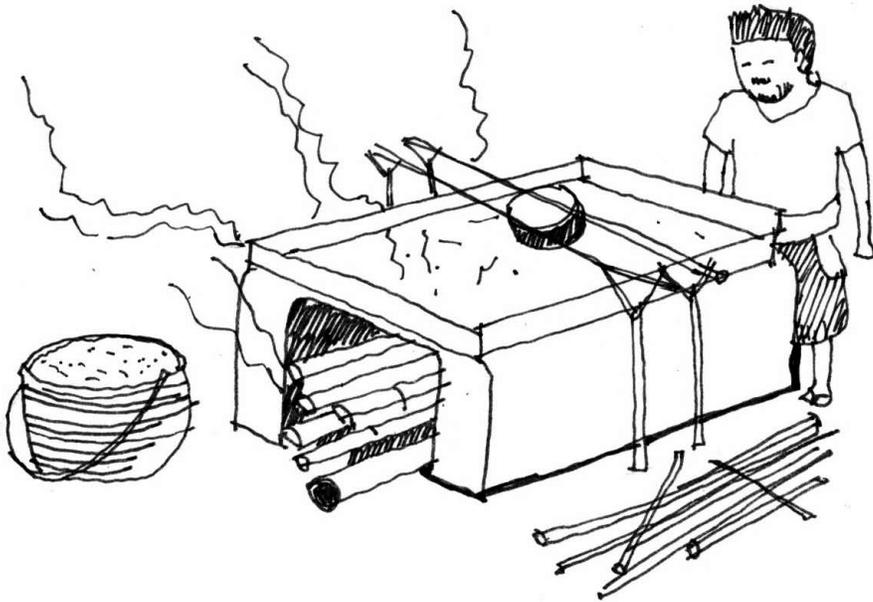


This is about the first human couple. Phya Thaen, who had created the earth, wanted to create humans. He molded his scurf into a human shape. Phya Thaen created one man and one woman and sent them to the earth. While they were falling down to the ground, a strong gust of wind came and blew them apart.

They were separated on both sides of a big river. The man was called Grandpa Sang Ka Sa, and the woman Grandma Sang Ka Si.

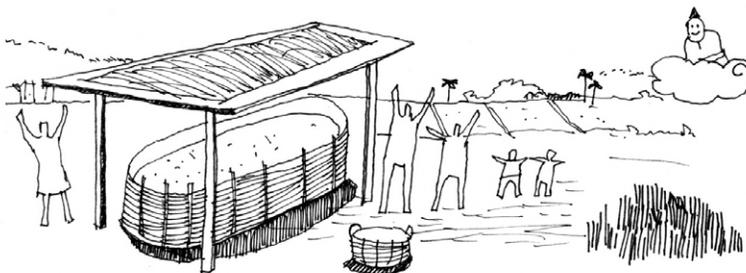
When they reached the ground, they thought about how to meet each other. They planted a gourd and used the vines to build a bridge over the river. Then, they finally met each other. They helped each other to live, until one day Grandpa Sang Ka Sa wanted Grandma Sang Ka Si to become





his wife. So Grandpa Sang Ka Sa said to Grandma Sang Ka Si straightforwardly, "We have lived together for a long time. You are a woman. I am a man. We should have children as our descendants. We are already old." Grandma Sang Ka Si replied, "We can marry. But a man is a leader of a family and should be wise. Working hard alone is not enough. If you answer my riddle, it will show that you are wise, and I will agree to be your wife. My riddle is not difficult. If you have wisdom, you can answer." The riddle was, "In this world, what is dark and light?"

Grandpa Sang Ka Sa heard the riddle and said, "I can answer. You really asked me an easy question." He then said, "Dark is the moonless night. The sun sets and it is dark. This is the nature that we see every day. However, on a full-moon night, the sun sets and it is light. Is it not true?" Grandma Sang Ka Si showed a disappointed look and said, "No. Your answer is wrong. I cannot be your wife. You are good at many things but you could not answer my riddle. I will give you another chance. Go and find the answer. I will wait for you here."





So Grandpa Sang Ka Sa traveled to find the answer. He traveled ten thousand years but still could not find the right answer. He was disappointed and decided to go back to see Grandma Sang Ka Si.

Having known Grandpa Sang Ka Sa was returning, Phya Thaen transformed himself into a *rusi*, or hermit, and waited for Grandpa Sang Ka Sa on his way. Grandpa Sang Ka Sa saw the hermit and asked him about the riddle, "In this world, what is dark and light? Help me answer the riddle. I have traveled for ten thousand years but have yet to find the right answer." The hermit said, "This is a *dharma* question. The world exists because of *dharma*, or cosmic law and order. The darkness and lightness is the human mind. If it is dark, the world will not proceed. If it is light, the world will prosper. The darkness is the human mind which does not accept *dharma*. Bleakness appears. Greed appears. The lightness is the human mind which accepts *dharma*. If it does not know, it will seek. If it already knows, it will reflect. This is the right answer."

Having learned the answer, Grandpa Sang Ka Sa became happy, left the hermit, and hurried back to see Grandma Sang Ka Si. It took him another ten thousand years. The vine bridge was still there and helped him cross the river. When he finally met Grandma Sang Ka Si and gave the answer to her riddle, Grandma Sang Ka Si said, "The answer is right. But it has taken you twenty thousand years. It has been so long. My mind has changed. I do not want to marry you." Grandpa Sang Ka Sa was very disappointed, went back to the other side of the river, and stayed there with sadness.



Grandpa Sang Ka Sa asked for Phya Thaen's help again, saying, "I have tried in vain. I want to marry the woman but it does not work out. She is too smart." Phya Thaen wanted to find a way to make the two live together. He appeared in Grandpa Sang Ka Sa's dream and said, "Mold two water buffalos out of clay, one male and the other female." The next morning, Grandpa Sang Ka Sa woke up and followed Phya Thaen's advice. He hurriedly crossed the river and went to see Grandma Sang Ka Si. He then molded two water buffalos. Phya Thaen saw it and ordered *devas*, or supernatural beings, to be born as water buffalos. So the two water buffalos came to life and could work.

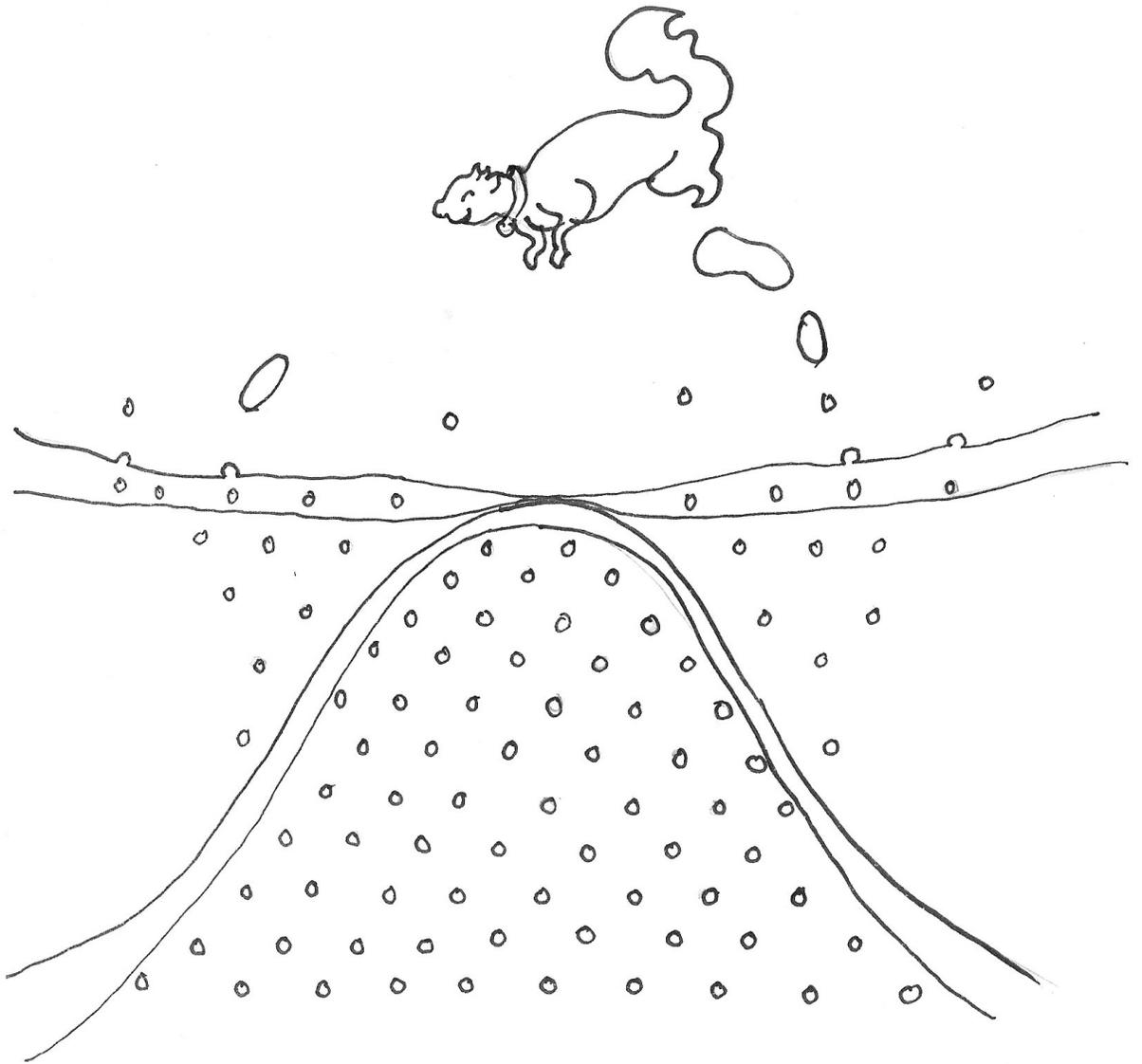
When Grandma Sang Ka Si saw this, she understood that Grandpa Sang Ka Sa was wise. She said, "You have come here to lead me. Please help me build a community. We must have children and grandchildren. The two water buffalos you have just created can help us." Grandpa Sang Ka Sa was very happy. Soon after, the female water buffalo gave birth to baby buffalos. Grandma Sang Ka Si agreed to marry Grandpa Sang Ka Sa. Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si farmed, lived together, and had many children and grand-children. A problem occurred, however. They had rice, fish and gourds to eat. But they were not tasty or nutritious. So their children and grandchildren were very thin, weak and not smart.

Phya Thaen learned about this and became worried. He transformed himself into a *chang phuek*, or a white elephant. The elephant walked around on Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si's farmland and urinated all over. The urine crystallized into a dry white crust on the soil surface. When Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si tasted it, they found it salty. They followed the elephant's footprints but the elephant had disappeared.

Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si suggested to their children and grand-children that they use *din aead*, a white crust crystalized on the soil surface, to make salt and produce *pla daek*, or fermented fish. *Pla daek* was added to food to make it tasty. It helped the children and grandchildren of Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si become stronger and healthier.

Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si's descendants increased in number. Their village expanded. The amount of salt was limited, however, and villagers started to quarrel and fight over it. So Phya Thaen transformed himself into a white elephant again. The white elephant walked through the area while urinating and finally urinated all over from the river to the mountain and the Himmaphan Forest which, according to Buddhists' beliefs, is a forest in heaven. This made the area into fertile land. Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si's descendants became strong and healthy and did not have to starve. When they finished the salt harvesting season, they could sell salt for income, too. This has been the case until the present.







# PHADAENG AND NANG AI

# PHADAENG AND NANG AI

**Illustrations by Amarit Muadthong**

*This story was told by Mr. Thawon Manosin at Huay Sam Phad Sub-district, Prachaksinlapakhom District in Udon Thani Province on 9 November 2014. It is about the creation of Nong Han Lake in Udon Thani Province and refers to a number of existing place names in the area. White squirrel meat in the story symbolizes salt or potassium/potash. If humans excavate and overuse the minerals, the land will collapse just as those living in Khita Nakhon, including Nang Ai, consumed too much squirrel meat and the city collapsed.*

There lived Thaw Phangkhi, a son of Naga. Phangkhi transformed himself into a squirrel to look for Nang Ai. This was because Phangkhi had been born as a dumb man in his previous life. Nang Ai, in her previous life, was Nang Ongkham, who was a daughter of a rich man. Her beauty was well known, but she was not in love with anyone. Her parents liked the dumb man because he was hard-working, and asked him to marry Nang Ongkham. But the dumb man did not like her. He was not interested in her and did not have a relationship with her. They stayed together and only played the roles of husband and wife.

Many years passed. The dumb man became rich and wanted to go back to his parents living in an old house. He lied to Nang Ongkham that he would go by himself. Nang Ongkham said, however, that she wanted to go with her husband to meet his mother. But the husband did not want her to come with him. He wanted to escape from her. They traveled together and in the evening they stopped at a fig tree on a riverbank. The husband climbed up the tree to eat figs. But he did not toss even one to Nang Ongkham. He did not show interest in her. She became hungry and ate figs on the ground. The husband did not come down to the ground but



slept in the tree, while Nang Ongkham slept under the tree. When the husband saw Nang Ongkham fall asleep, he came down and fled away, leaving her all by herself.

Luckily, no tiger came to eat Nang Ongkham. She woke up and did not see her husband. She walked out of the forest but did not know which way to go. She then met a hunter, who offered to take her to the river. The hunter then told her to wade across the river to visit her husband's house on the other side, and left. While crossing the river, however, Nang Ongkham drowned. Her body sank into the river. When dying, she wished that in her next life her husband would love her. She also wished to be more beautiful and wanted him to become crazy about her.

Nang Ongkham's life ended and her new life began in Khita Nakhon. She was born to be Nang Aikham, or Nang Ai. The hunter was born to be Thaw Phadaeng. The dumb man became Thaw Phangkhi.

Nang Ai was a daughter of Khita Nakhon's king. The king had a younger brother in Chiang Hien. Nang Ai's beauty was well known in many places, including Pha Phong, where Thaw Phadaeng was living. Phadaeng travelled to Khita Nakhon and heard that Nang Ai was very beautiful. So, Phadaeng sneaked into Nang Ai's room, courted her, and had a relationship with her. Nang Ai's reputation of being beautiful also reached underground. Thaw Phangkhi heard that Nang Ai was beautiful, transformed himself to be a human, and approached her. However, he was not able to come close to her. So he went back home and came to visit her again. But he still could not get a chance to talk with her.





At Khita Nakhon, they held a ceremony in the fifth or the sixth month of the year. It was called *Bun Baek Fa Ko Fon Jud Bang Fai*, and was to ask for the rain from the sky. It was held together with the *bang fai*, or rocket competition. The king of Khita Nakhon sent out invitation letters to various places, including Pha Phong and Chiang Hien. The king announced, “If Chiang Hien wins, I will award them my town. If Thaw Phadaeng from Pha Phong wins, I will award him Nang Ai.” On the day of the ceremony and competition, many people came. News about the *bang fai* competition reached underground. Phangkhi came up to the earth and transformed himself into a human to come close to Nang Ai. He still could not talk with her, however.

The *bang fai* competition began. The competition lasted seven days and seven nights. Phadaeng’s rocket did not go the highest, however. He was defeated by the king of Chiang Hien and could not win Nang Ai to be his wife. However, Phadaeng still continued riding a horse named Ma Bug Sam and regularly visited Nang Ai. Phangkhi could not accept this and made many plans, but they were unsuccessful. So he transformed himself into a white squirrel, came up to Nang Ai’s terrace, and played there so that she could see him. Nang Ai wanted to catch the squirrel and asked her servants to bring a hunter. A hunter happened to live close by and came to hunt the squirrel. The hunter’s house was located in the present-day Kong Phan Village. The hunter also asked villagers to come and help him hunt the squirrel.

At first, the white squirrel escaped into a *suan mon*, or mulberry garden, which was in the present-day Suan Mon Village, and passed a forest to get to a *jan* tree on Um Jan Hill, which is now in Um Jan Village. The hunter could not shoot the squirrel, however. From Um Jan Hill, the squirrel went into Phon Thong Hill in the present-day Phon Thong Village, but the hunter still could not shoot the squirrel. The string, or *sai*, on his bow broke. The hunter looked for a new string but could not find one. He then found one at Phon Thong Village, and carried it to Khon Sai Village (Carry String Village), and shot the squirrel. He still could not catch it, however. The bow made a loud noise, "*puk*." So, the area came to be called Muang Puk Village. The squirrel, or Phangkhi, ordered his servants, the birds and snakes, to scare off the hunter. The hunter did not get scared, however. He shot the birds and snakes and killed them all.

The white squirrel escaped from Phon Thong Hill and went into a hollow of a big tree in the forest. The hunter thought that the squirrel must be in the hollow and shot together with many villagers, but still could not kill it. The squirrel ran away further. The hunter chased after it. This time, the hunter had to call in Siang Som, a novice monk who had left the monkhood and just seen the squirrel. Siang Som was given a reward, or *nguen*, and guided the hunter and villagers to Don Nguen Village. The hunter and villagers chased the squirrel into a fig tree. The hunter shot the squirrel. It dropped from the tree and died.

The hunter and villagers came where the present-day Chaing Haew Village is located and Siang Som sliced the squirrel's meat. When cut, however, it multiplied and eventually filled up one thousand carts. The meat was then shared with everyone in Khita Nakhon except for widows, who did not have a husband or children to send out to help the hunter and so were not given the meat. In the evening, the villagers gathered and ate the meat. The delicious smell reached underground.

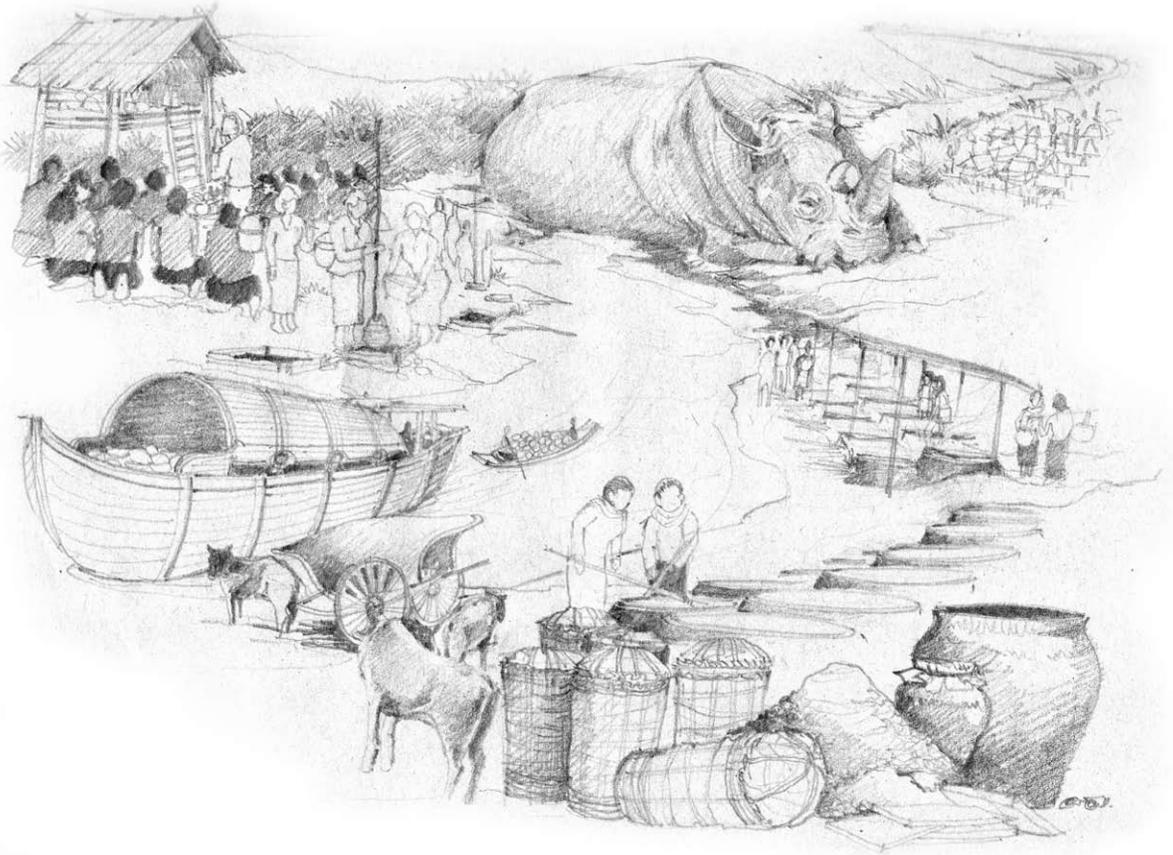
News came to King Naga's underground city that his son had been shot to death. King Naga became very angry and ordered his soldiers to go up and bury Khita Nakhon. Wherever the soldiers found the squirrel meat on the ground, they caused that place to sink underground.

Phadaeng came to Khita Nakhon at dinner time to look for Nang Ai and smelled food. When he came to Nang Ai's room, she was still eating and said to Phadaeng, "I have had *larb krarog* (minced squirrel meat salad), which I got from a squirrel with a gold necklace around its neck." Phadaeng asked, "Are you not afraid that your land will collapse into the underground?" When he said this, a loud noise came from the city. Phadaeng told Nang Ai to hurry and jump up on the back of Ma Bug Sam, his horse. The city began to be destroyed. Nang Ai snatched her valuables like a ring and a necklace and other things like a gong, a drum and gold.

This made it difficult for Ma Bug Sam to flee. King Naga and his soldiers were approaching, while rending the earth. Ma Bug Sam came to a river. Phadaeng told Nang Ai to throw away the things she had brought with her because they were too heavy. So she threw away the gong. It was not enough. She then threw away the drum. It was still not enough. She threw away the ring and everything. The only thing left was herself. Ma Bug Sam tried to jump over a log which was blocking its way. However, it was not possible because it was King Naga who had transformed himself into the log.

Phadaeng thought of ways to save Nang Ai. He put a pole on the ground, and left her there to pick up later. However, right after he had put her on the ground, she sank into the water. Phadaeng and Ma Bug Sam went back to the city and saw only a lake full of water. This is how Nong Han Lake was created.







# RHINO HEAD POND

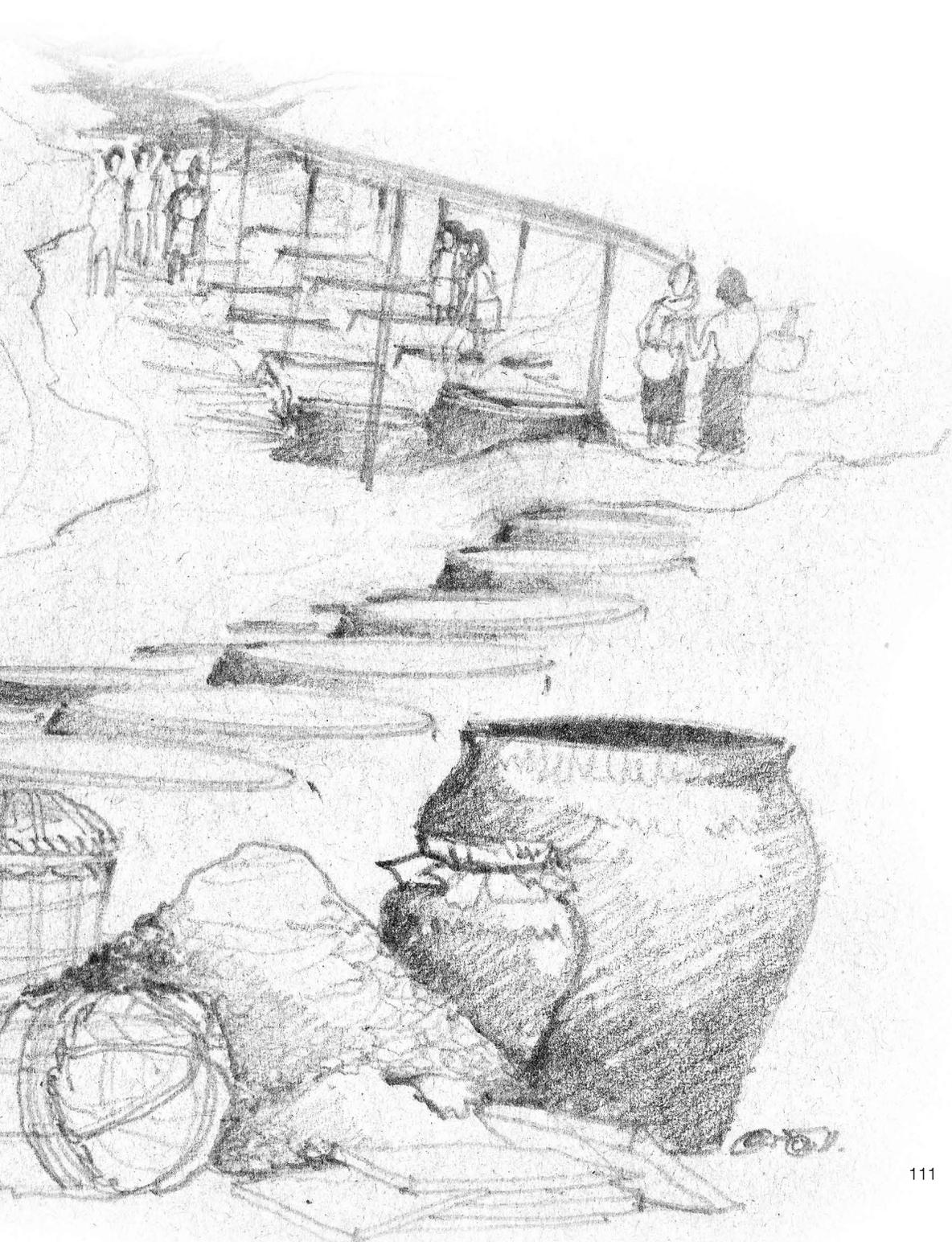
# RHINO HEAD POND

Illustrations by Anekpong Ittijan

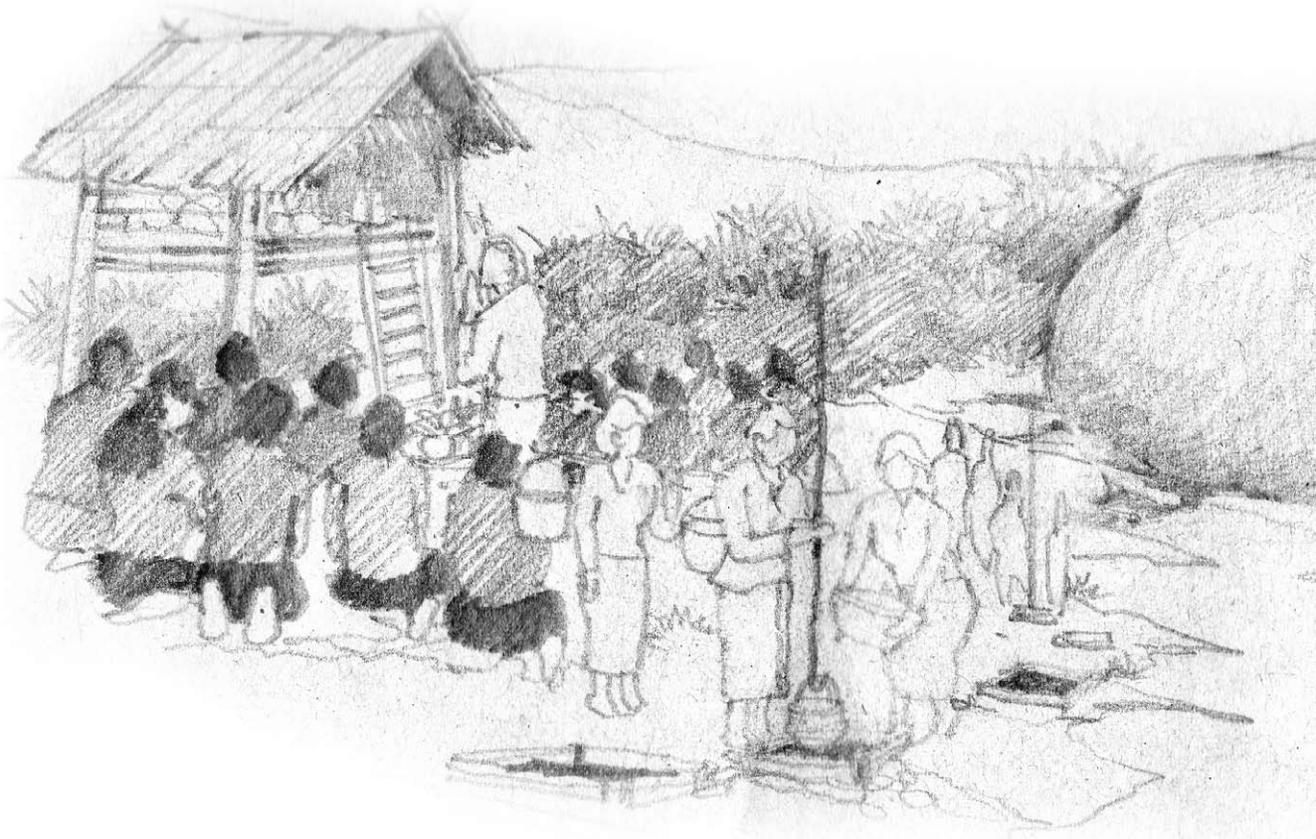
*This story was told by Mr. Buali Suwannakhot on 21 November 2014. Mr. Buali was 98 years old and living in Muang Khan, Tha Sa'ad Sub-district, Seka District in Bungkan Province. It is about the history of his village. Mr. Buali's parents migrated from the town of Attapue in the south, because the life there had been very hard. His mother's name was Pong. His father was probably ethnic So. Travelling on a boat, Mr. Buali's parents entered the mouth of the Songkhram River at Tha U Thaen and sailed upstream. They then found a pond at the present-day Hua Haed Chiang Khrue Village. Mr. Buali's family settled down and started to make salt.*

A long time ago, before villagers built a community, a rhinoceros had lived in a forest near the Songkhram River. The rhino rested on the riverbank, drank water, and licked salt. One day a king, who ruled the area, came and saw the rhino resting near the riverbank. The king took out a gun and shot the rhino. The rhino died. The bullet went through and reached the riverbank. The stream there was then named Huay Luk Puen, or Bullet Stream.

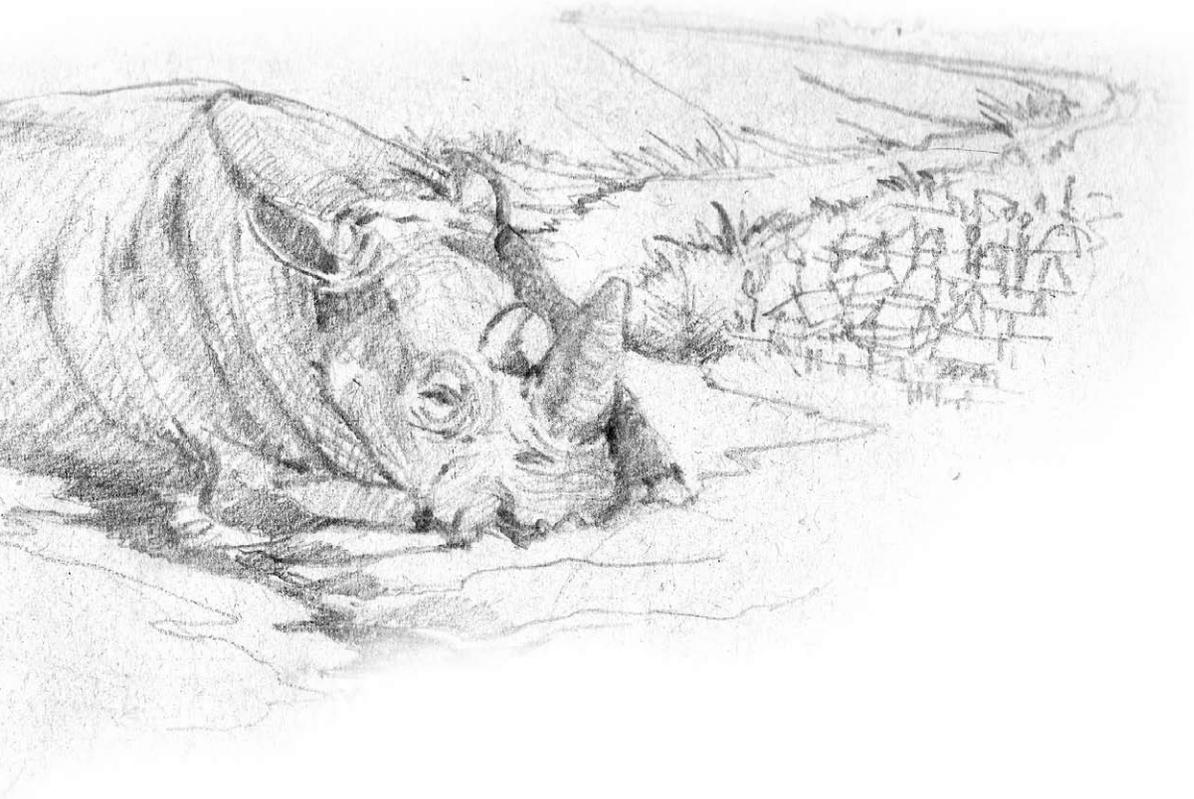




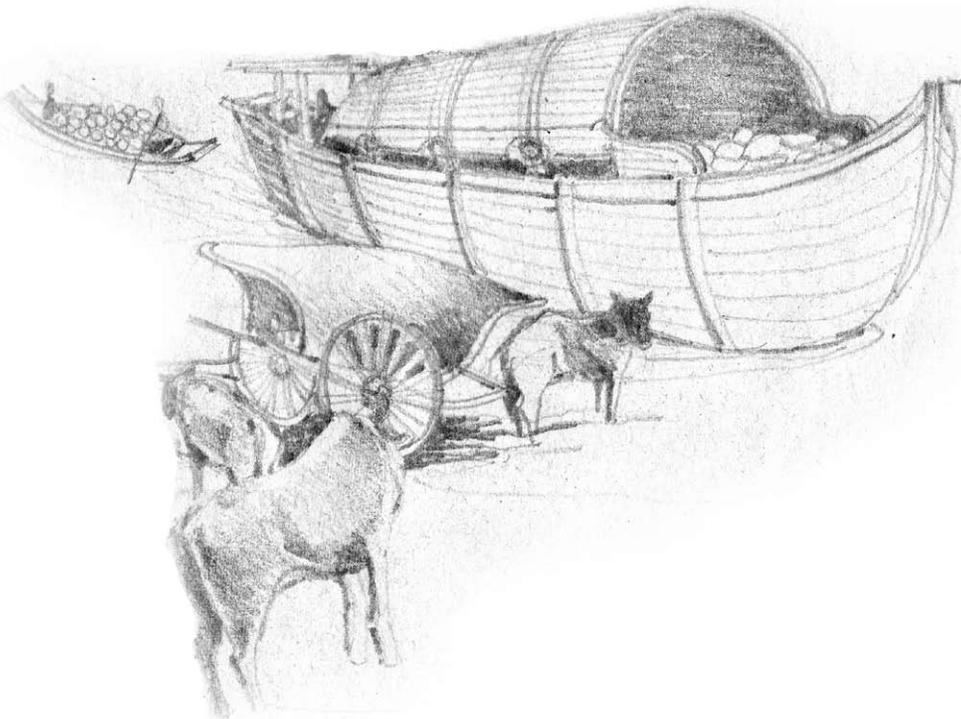
The king shared the rhino meat and skin with his people. While they were sharing, a big storm came. The rain fell on the meat. It then turned into a red stone. Many years later, villagers living in the area saw water inside the stone. They wondered if the water was clean. They took the water out and boiled it. The water turned into salt. So, the villagers decided to use it for cooking and also for making *pla daek*, or fermented fish.<sup>5</sup> They started trading salt for other things, and did this for many years. Some villagers said that part of the rhino meat and its head fell into a pond and never went bad. So, the villagers used the water to produce salt. In any case, salt production in the area developed. Many people moved in. The area expanded, and so did the salt industry.



Many more years passed. A spirit named Thaw Si Thon Kham Daeng, or Jao Pho Kham Daeng, lived in the area. Actually, Jao Pho Kham Daeng lived there before the rhino. When many people came to produce salt at a salt pond, Jao Pho Kham Daeng became annoyed. He decided not to give them any salt. He also caused them trouble so that they could no longer stay healthy. The salt makers were in trouble and went to ask a fortune teller for advice. The fortune teller told them to build a shelter for Jao Pho Kham Daeng, and appoint a man to contact him and serve him pork. The fortune teller also advised that they make salt in the evening. Peace came to the area.



The area became famous for salt. More and more people came to produce salt for trade. At first, they wove small baskets to carry salt. Later, they wove big baskets that held 12 kilograms of salt.<sup>6</sup> Salt production in the area attracted many traders. The area expanded and Tha Leung Puey became a center for salt production. At first, villagers living near-by moved to settle down in Tha Lueng Puey, and it expanded further. New people, including migrating traders, came to stay. Many houses were built in Tha Sa'ad, which was near a big tree along the riverbank. The population increased. A temple was built and a market opened. The area was then named Tha Sa'ad Village. Many people gathered for trading and the village gradually grew. Many monks came to live, too.



Salt traders came to buy salt in big boats. Each boat was 25 to 40 meters long, five to ten meters wide, and two to three meters deep. They bought salt here and sold it in other places. Around 20 crew members were in each boat. They purchased around six to ten tons of salt. One boat went as far as to the mouth of the river at Saiburi. Five to seven small boats also came. Some say that ten to 20 boats came to buy two to three tons of salt. In addition, many smaller boats came to trade salt along the river. Salt traders sometime travelled as far as to Mukdahan, Khemrath, Nong Khai, Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champasak. Some traders transported salt by cart on land.

Villagers worked hard in the daytime and relaxed in the nighttime. About three hundred worked to produce salt at Hua Haed Pond. Women also came to work. They wove baskets to contain salt. There was no electricity. So when a woman wanted to see a man's face, she would use fire. The villagers earned about 10,000 Baht (330 USD) trading salt, and paid about 800 Baht (25 USD) per year to hire workers. Workers stayed at Hua Haed Pond from around November or December to prepare firewood, and then produced salt from around February to April the next year. They then packed the salt, and waited until the flood season in August, when they could transport the salt along the river for trading.<sup>7</sup>







THE EFFICACY OF FEAR -  
**FOREST  
SPIRITS**

## THE EFFICACY OF FEAR – FOREST SPIRITS

*This story is composed of interviews with several informants in Rasi Salai District in Sisaket Province. In Thailand and Laos, it is believed that spirits reside on any land or forest. A small shrine is always set up in the grounds of a house to honor the spirit of the land. In Northeast Thailand, many villages also have a forest, known as a don phutha (ancestral forest), which is revered as sacred ground. The two forests of Don Phudin and Don Phudaen, introduced here, lie alongside the Mun River, a tributary of the Mekong. It is believed that the spirits of the people, known as Chao Pho, who were once the royal family of Laos, live in and protect these forests.*

*The majority of the population inhabiting these and similar forests, which are held in great awe by the people, are mainly ethnic Lao, who are to be found throughout Northeastern Thailand as well as in the central and southern areas of Laos. These people help to keep the forests in good condition, even in fast-developing Northeastern Thailand. In order to improve their lives, the people are always making use of the forest, and appear to believe that they can control the spirits by performing religious rites (for example, when building a house on the land or when clearing the forest to make a field). In Don Phudin and Don Phudaen, however, there are taboos that strongly inhibit the use of natural resources. From listening to the villagers' stories, it was possible to understand their feelings of reverence toward the forest and their desire to protect it, which also provides them with the spiritual support they need in their efforts to prevent rampant development by companies.*

## A story about cutting down trees in Don Phudin

Until several years ago I was very self-centered. As there were good trees in Don Phudin, I went with my friend to cut some of them down to make a stairway for my house. As we were coming out of the forest, my friend said, "There is a person in white clothes following us." However, I could not see the person and asked angrily, "What are you afraid of?" When we reached the house, I suddenly collapsed with a fever. I went to see the doctor, but was told that I was not sick. My stomach ached. I had diarrhea and an especially bad fever. I then decided to consult *Naan Thiam* (a woman possessed by one of the *Chao Pho*).

"You stole wood from Don Phudin, did you not? The *Chao Pho* are furious. You will die if you do not apologize," she intoned. After making an offering of a pig's head and four bottles of rice wine (the number of the pig's legs) I was completely cured.

Even now, lots of villagers die from such curses. Despite the fact that his father was a *djam* (an intermediary who mediates between the villagers and the possessed people), one man wanted to build a sturdy house, but died when he cut down a big tree in the forest. That was 40 or 50 years ago. In these cases, pleading with the spirits after the fact is of no use. Breaking taboos even though you do not know about them is a grave sin.





## Keeping promises

In 2013, the racing boat kept at the shrine was supposed to be repainted, but the paint ran out part way through the job and the village headman simply abandoned it. That evening, I went out to fish with a tangle net and was attacked by a ghost at about seven o'clock in the evening. The same thing happened again the next day, which I thought was strange, but asking around I found that the boat repainting work had not been completed. Since it was possible that this might result in other problems, I went around the village asking for donations and finished the job. If you once tell the *Chao Pho* you are going to do something, you must never fail to see it through to the end.

## The Mun River Tham (Cavern)

The Mekong River, its tributary the Mun River, and Mun's tributary the Chi River, are linked together by underground caverns. These are known as the *Tham Phayanaak* (caverns of the naga/dragon). The cavern in this area is linked to the cavern in Nong Khai Province (in the northern part of Northeastern Thailand, near Vientiane). The *Chao Pho* came to this area by way of these caverns. Many years ago, there was trade by boats that came up the Mun River from the Mekong River, and so there are places where there is sunken treasure. People who have found gold on the riverbed in this area have died two or three days later if they took it home with them. This is not a problem if the spirits have given the gold as a gift, but if the gift is not accepted when it is offered, it cannot be found if the person goes back to look for it later.

## Protecting the forest

A company dredging sand for construction started work on the Mun River right in front of the village. The company received permission from the village headman, but the villagers were not informed about it until later. Fishing was affected, and the coming and going of the trucks carrying the sand out caused a large number of cracks to appear in the village roads. The road in front of the kindergarten was also damaged, and the trucks were not permitted to pass that way. The company then built a separate road which passed through the forest, and the damage to the village ceased.

After a while, however, the damage began to occur again. I looked at the documents and realized that it was not clear how far the company was permitted to carry out its operations. After I started to look into the matter, I began to receive death threats from people related to the company. I then consulted with a villager I knew well, and we decided to get the company to leave the village area. That was nine years ago.



At first, we had no idea how to go about doing this, but we blocked the road to stop the transport of sand out of the village. This turned into a huge commotion, with even the provincial governor turning up to mediate, though no agreement was reached and the blockade continued. The company was dredging sand out of the Mun River in several places without knowing where the boundaries of the permitted area were. Even the province said that they did not have firm knowledge of the area (i.e., in square kilometers) for operations of the company. In the end, after blockading the road for a week, the villagers' demands were met. The villagers were absolutely terrified that erosion of the riverbank caused by the dredging would result in trees collapsing in the forest. The owner of the company had been paying his respects to the *Chao Pho* shrine by making annual offerings of a pig's head, rice wine and other goods. At the same time, though, he was destroying the environment, and that was unacceptable. The villagers were angry about the possibility of becoming ill from the sand dust and about the impact on the forest from the dredging. Before blocking the road, we consulted the *Chao Pho* and prayed that none of the villagers would be arrested.

## The relationship of the villagers with the forest

Because they protect us, I feel no need to run away from the *Chao Pho* even if they punish us. When villagers set out on a long trip and when they return they go and pray at the shrine. We also pray at the shrines twice a year, on a Wednesday or Thursday at the end of the rainy season, going first to the Don Phudaen shrine. The other time is during May of the lunar calendar. The forest is protected by *thaep* (angels). We cannot see them, but they can see us. There are also lots of medicinal herbs in the forest.

In the past, to prevent people from cutting down trees and stealing the timber, we would tie a thief up at the edge of the forest and ask the *Chao Pho* to come and break the person's legs. Once, when I brought wood home myself, unwittingly forgetting to ask for permission, I dropped the timber on my legs and could not walk. I remembered that I had not asked for permission and apologized to the *Chao Pho*. I was then able to walk home on what should have been my broken legs. My legs healed in about a week.

If an outsider who does not know about the taboos cuts down trees, the villagers will be punished. This is a reproach from the *Chao Pho* for not protecting the forest properly. The villagers are therefore very watchful to see that nothing like that happens.



# PART III

# NOTES

1. Alternative spellings are Khmu, Kammu, Khmou, Khamou and Khomu (Simana and Preisig 2006: 79).
2. This story was told at Chom Leng Noy Village, Pakbeng District in Oudomxay Province on 25 July 2010.
3. The deer appearing in this story is a muntjac, a small species known as *fahn* in Lao, or *puai* in Kmhmu'.
4. Part of the story is omitted.
5. Mr. Mun Khimpraset, or Grandpa Lung, 68 years old, at Tan Diew Village in Tha Sa'ad Sub-district told a very similar story. In Grandpa Lung's version, however, it was a hunter, and not a king, who killed the rhino. The hunter then used salt to cook the rhino meat. Villagers at Hua Haed Village, or Rhino Head Village, were given the rhino head. Onions from Nong Mua Miang Village were added to cook *larb haed*, or minced rhino meat. While cooking, salt from the rhino fell on the ground. The villagers took the soil, boiled it, and dried it to produce salt.
6. According to Grandpa Lung, the salt price in the past was around three to 30 US cents per basket at Hua Haed. It rose to 60 US cents in the market at the mouth of the Songkhram River.
7. The information in this paragraph came from Grandpa Lung's story. He himself used to hire four workers every year to produce salt. He then traded it mostly at the mouth of the Sayaburi River in Ton Kian Village, Tha Khaek and That Phanom on the Lao side. After a road had been built, he also used a truck to trade salt. He earned about 5,000 Baht (160 USD) for a truckload of salt. Before, the salt was put into a basket, but now it is stored in a metal container.

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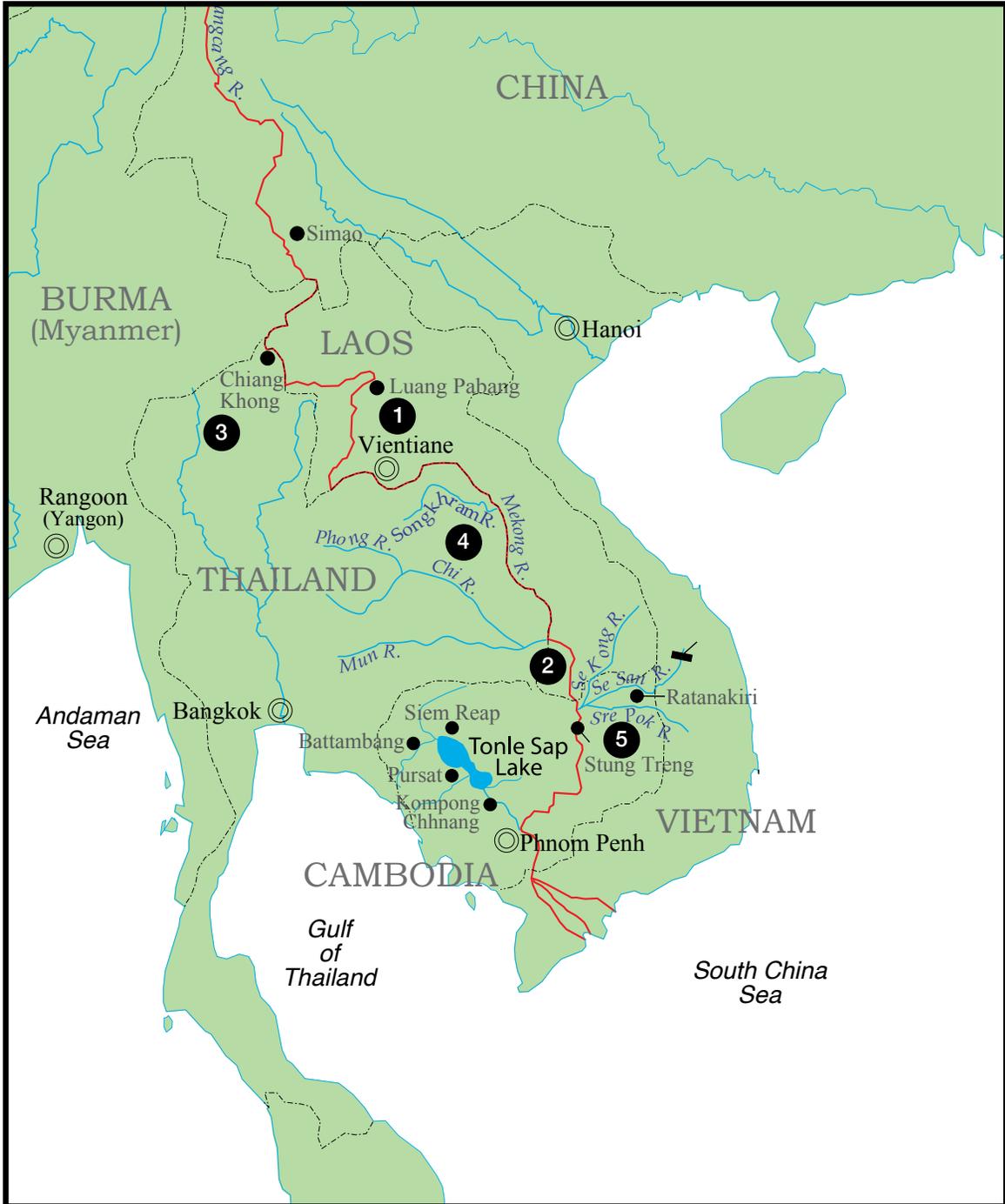
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# FIELDWORK SITES MAP

- 1 Kmhmu' in Northern and Central Laos
- 2 Siphandon in Southern Laos
- 3 Akha in Northern Thailand
- 4 Thai So and Isan in Northeastern Thailand
- 5 Bunong in Northeastern Cambodia







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