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## The innovative need to preserve Buddhist cultural manifestations

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### Abstract

Mindful preservation of age-old Buddhist cultural manifestations is an ethical duty, especially so in our present era when rapid cultural displacement and disruption have become the norm under the ongoing onslaught of capitalism and consumerist modes of practice. The unmindful sabotaging and annihilation of indigenous cultural patterns have become widely prevalent. To counter this detrimental trend it is essential to go back to the roots of different Buddhist cultural manifestations and preserve them in the original form for the ethico-religious educational training of the younger generation. Buddhist cultural identity is a very broad term and under its rubric we will discuss a distinct tradition from Northeast Thailand (Isan), which clearly depicts the adaptation and assimilation of a Buddhist Jataka story with local modes of expression and ideas. While adaptation and assimilation give rise to harmonious blending of differences, preservation of distinctiveness leads to a tolerant acceptance of the proliferation of the differences within and outside of one's own community or region. These are like two different flows of currents, but each can actually complement the other and in this regard helps actualize the reinforcement of the threefold training of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* through cultural preservation. If we take the case of Northeast Thailand, we can see the richness of the Buddhist cultural heritage of the region still being reflected through the very unique twelve-month tradition, collectively named as *Prapheni Heet Sibsong*, and of which the Mahachat Sung-sermon forms a major performative ceremonial event. But like the rest of the country, Isan too is rapidly changing due to various factors operative in the modernization process and we can witness a persistent eroding of ethico-cultural values and doxastic foundation among the younger generation. If the process of cultural erosion continues unabated, the younger generation would become completely 'illiterate' and hence indifferent to the richness of the indigenous Buddhist culture that was once shaped by their ancestors. Hence the need arises to give rise to innovative ways to preserve pristine cultural manifestations vis-à-vis the cosmopolitan forces that go against such preservation. The religion of urbanization is not Buddhism, but materialism, and to sustain this new *weltanschauung*, Buddhism gets either appropriated for material/worldly gains, or relegated and replaced by a more secular and non-religious identity and mind-set for sheer ideological purpose, both equally detrimental for Buddhists in the long run. Hence there is an exigent need for an alternative interventionist stance to dismantle the two polarized positions – one of appropriation for worldly consumerist gains, and the other of complete annihilation under the guise of the ideology of secularism. Accepting the truth of the ethical role of such a stance, this paper highlights the significance of preservation of Buddhist cultural identity in an inter-connected world from within the context of Northeast Thailand.

**Keywords:** Buddhist cultural identity, Prapheni Heet Sibsong, Mahachat Sung-sermon,  
Alternative interventionist stance, Polarized position

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