CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF THE TAI PHAKE COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

POW AIM HAILOWNG

zubaan

ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2020
In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation

Zubaan is an independent feminist publishing house based in New Delhi with a strong academic and general list. It was set up as an imprint of India's first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women, and carries forward Kali's tradition of publishing world quality books to high editorial and production standards. *Zubaan* means tongue, voice, language, speech in Hindustani. Zubaan publishes in the areas of the humanities, social sciences, as well as in fiction, general non-fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF THE TAI PHAKE COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

INTRODUCTION[1]

The Tai Phake[2] (pronounced *Tai Pha-kae)* is a small tribal community of about 2,000 people scattered around Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in North East India. Originally from Moung Mao, South China, the Tai Phake migrated to Myanmar from Moung Mao. From there, they came to Assam, India in 1775 and established villages in different regions of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In 1816 when the Burmese invaded Assam, there were Tai army officials in the Burmese army who saw the Tai Phakes as their kin and wanted them to go to their ancestral homes. Accordingly, the Tai Phake travelled back with the army officials. However, on reaching Namchik (in present day Arunachal Pradesh), the monsoons started and the Tai Phake, with their families and children, found it difficult to brave the rough terrain of the Patkai hill ranges. Army officials advised the Tai Phake to continue their journey during the dry season and left.

As time passed, the idea of going back to their ancestral home did not materialise and when the British took over Assam, the Tai Phake traversed downhill in search of suitable land for establishing several villages. The major Tai Phake villages in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are Maan[3] Namphake, Maan Tipam, Maan Nav, Maan Ninggam, Maan Phaneng, Maan Mo, and Maan Mounglang.

Tai Phake elderly men and women. Photo by Ai Lot Hailowng

The Tai Phake identify themselves as Buddhists and follow certain pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs. They have carried their culture with them through their years of migration. Endowed with a unique culture including language, colourful costumes, residence style, and arts, the Tai Phake have been able to maintain their ethnicity even in the face of changing times, albeit with difficulty. Their literature is a rich reflection of their lively character and love for freedom and a happy life. Literature among the Tai Phakes has mostly survived orally from generation to generation, despite the presence of the Tai Phake script.

Attempts at documenting the script started only in the last few decades with folk tales, songs, and lullabies being preserved in the Tai Phake script and being translated into Assamese and English. The Tai Phake language is a monosyllabic and tonal language. There are six tones for every word, and each tone represents a different word with its own meaning.[4] Two words may be combined to form a new word. *Pu Son Lan* (*Pu*-grandfather *Son*-teaches *Lan*- grandchild) is a document consisting of dialogues between a grandfather and his grandchild about the correct way of life. This document exists in a written form in the Tai Phake script. It includes a section called *Lan Thin Pu* in which the grandfather learns from the grandchild. Another book documented in the Tai Phake script is *Lik Pha Mu Ma Ok Khun* (fur never grows on the palm of the hand).

TYPES OF TAI PHAKE LITERATURE

There are different types of Tai Phake literature:

- History (*Lik Khow Khun, Lik Khow Moung*)
- Folk songs (*Mo Kham*)
    - Lullaby (*Mo Kham Lao Luk*)
    - Illustrative/descriptive songs (*Khe Khyang*)
    - Rhyming songs (*Sa Oye, Kham Oye*)
    - Songs when threshing rice (*Mo Kham Soy Yoy*)
    - Prayers (*Lik Pai Phra*)
    - Songs paying obeisance to nature, mother earth (*Lik Woi, Lik Masoungtari*),
    - Death songs (*Kham Hai Kaap*)
- Stories, folk tales (*Pung*)
- Moral idioms (*Kham Son*)

- Riddles (*Kham Ta*)
- Religious script (*Lik Tham*)
- Law manuscript (*Thammasat*)
- Superstition (*Lik Ka Na*)
- Astrology (*Lik Phae*)
- Herbal medicine (*Paap Nae Ya*)
- Spells (*Maan Taan*)
- Manuscript on death rituals (*Lo Ka Sammukthi*)
- Calling of *khon* (*Hong Khon*)
- Rhyming book (*Lik Khow Mo*)
- Novellas
- Epic/myth (*La Ma Mang, Dhammaputram*)

TAI PHAKE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In the vast expanse of Tai Phake literature, children's literature can be categorised as:

1. Lullabies (*Mo Kham Lao Luk*)
2. Folk tales (*Pung*)
3. Moral idioms (*Kham Son*)
4. Riddles (*Kham Ta*)

Nature of Tai Phake children's literature

Academically, there are divergent views on what constitutes children's literature and how children's literature is defined. According to Sale (1978), who is a fierce advocate of children's literature, 'Everyone knows what children's literature is until asked to define it. . . we are

better off saying we all have a pretty good idea of what children's literature includes and letting the matter rest there (1)'

In 1973, Myles McDowell wrote:

> ... children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order, probability is often disregarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity, and adventure... (51)

Perry Nodelman (2008) in his book The *Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* represents his view on children's literature as:

> Children's literature—the literature published specifically for audiences of children and therefore produced in terms of adult ideas about children, is a distinct and definable genre of literature, with characteristics that emerge from enduring adult ideas about childhood and that have consequently remained stable over the stretch of time in which this literature has been produced (242)

Mo Kham Lao Luk (lullaby), *Pung* (folk tale), *Kham Son* (idioms), and *Kham Ta* (riddles) are a rough selection of Tai Phake's children's literature. Tai Phake children and young adults also learn to chant prayers and sing *Khe Khyang* at an early age. In villages, children often accompany their mothers to the monastery for regular prayer congregations, or hearing the elders offering prayers in the morning as a daily practice and therefore pick up the art. But given the nature of their content, lullabies, folk tales, idioms, and riddles are categorised as Tai Phake children's literature.

Tai Phake people standing in front of a traditional Tai Phake house as a child looks on from the 'Chaan' (an open terrace-like structure). Photo by Am Chon Gohain

Tai Phake children's literature, mostly composed during the days of Moung Mao and Myanmar, is profoundly inspired by nature or is about nature. Tai Phake villages which were established in the forests surrounded by nature, had a very slow and gradual interaction and exposure to the world outside. Animals, birds, fruits, and flowers, which they saw every day and encountered in their day-to-day lives, form the most common motifs in lullabies, folk tales, and riddles. Being amid nature may have resulted in the personification of animals and birds for explaining good and evil, right and wrong to the children. It is understood that children would have found it more relatable to hear tales and riddles about nature and would also enjoy them more. Even though *pung* or stories/folk tales have human motifs, human characters mostly appear in other forms of literature like *Khe Khyang*. *Khe Khyang* are long rhyming poems sung by Tai Phake people describing an event or an occasion. Sometimes they are a humorous take on an event. Human characters are also present in novellas, epics, and myths.

Lullabies (Mo Kham Lao Luk)

Lullabies (*Mo Kham Lao Luk*) are songs sung by Tai Phake elders to cajole young ones to sleep or make them do certain activities that they are unwilling to perform, or for amusing them. Most of them do not follow a coherent pattern or flow of a story but have unsophisticated humorous instances that can make kids laugh. The rhyming words at the end, however, remain constant and indispensable throughout Tai Phake lullabies.

Table 3.1

	Translation
Top Cha Cha Oi Cha Su Ti,	Clap your hands, my little darling! Clap!
Het Nung Mae Maan,	Clap like a Burmese dancer
Ka Net Ting Khon Mu,	Dance with music and clap!
Top Cha Cha Oi, Cha Su Tang	Clap our hands, my little darling! Clap!
Het Nung Mao Moung Kong Su Chukuna	Clap like the boys of Moung Kong[5] who clap their hands while dancing merrily!
Tong Pha Neng, Meng Keng Hong	The evening sky is red, the cicada chirps
Tong Pha Khao Ken Yok,	The sky turns white like a banana shoot
Koup Hong Ti Nau Nong,	The toad croaks in the pond
Kong Hong Ti Nau Che,	The cuckoo sings in the town
Maa Hey Ti Nok Moung,	The horse neighs on the outskirts of the city
Ma Hau Ti Nok Maan,	The dog barks outside the village
Ma San Khu Cha,	The dillenia fruit is grumpy
Hong Pung! Pung!	Falls Pung! Pung!

Folk Tales (Pung)

Folk tales (*pung*) are generally about animals, birds, fairies, naughty imps and trolls, or humans, with or without a moral. But many folk tales teach about good and bad, intelligence and idiocy, and the rich and the poor. A lot of Tai Phake folk tales are about why a certain thing came to be. This is seemingly the result of the Tai Phakes churning

out stories of everyday life, related to the things they observed and encountered every day which in most cases were animals and birds for amusing children. Thus, the Tai Phakes came out with fascinating reasons for the sun coming out when the cock crows, how the tiger got its stripes, why the elephant has tiny eyes, and why the bulbul and the monkey ended up with red bottoms—both for very different reasons. Many Tai Phake folk tales instil humour even when there is minor physical pain showing the acceptance of joy and sorrow as a part and parcel of life.

The story of the pig and the buffalo

One day, the animals had an argument about who was stronger. Every animal had to show his strength and then quieten down. But the pig and the buffalo continued arguing. The pig claimed, 'I am stronger!' while the buffalo claimed, 'I am stronger!' Their argument echoed throughout the forestland, and all the birds and animals flocked to watch them. They argued for countless, endless days and nights. As the loud argument between the pig and the buffalo continued, an old tiger suggested that for judging who was stronger, their tails should be tied, and they should pull in opposite directions. During those days, pigs had a long sharp nose and a beautiful long tail with a bushy end. That long tail was tied to the buffalo's tail and on cue, both animals started pulling. Both the animals pulled with all their might while the birds and animals cheered and egged them on creating a cacophony. As the pig pulled and the buffalo pulled, suddenly the pig's tail detached from him and he flew forward and smashed its long sharp nose into an ant hill thus flattening his nose. The animals adjudged the buffalo the winner. The pig got angry and started digging the ant hill with his nose and did not look at the buffalo. The buffalo on the other hand carried with it a part of the pig's tail!

Thus, the pig got its snout and the buffalo got its long tail. The pig still avoids the buffalo and walks around head down digging dirt.

The monkey's red butt

One primate species very common in the forests of Assam is monkeys that have red bottoms. This story is about how the monkeys came to have red bottoms.

There was once an old couple who loved to chew *paan*. A monkey troubled them regularly, stealing food and sometimes scattering things in their home. One day they decided to catch the naughty monkey and hatched a plan: the old man would lie down as if dead, and when the monkey came near he would catch him. They felt it was a simple but effective plan. The next day, the monkey entered the house and came close to the old man who was lying very still. As the money sniffed, the old man sat up suddenly, reaching out for the monkey. But the monkey was too agile for him and skipped out of reach! The old man rushed out seething with anger. Outraged and helpless about what to do next, he spit out the red *paan* at the fleeing monkey! The *paan* flew and hit the monkey's behind with a *splat!* colouring it a bright red. Since then, the monkey has been carrying the red stain.

Idioms (Kham Son)

Moral idioms (*Kham Son)* in *Pu Son Lan* have been a rich source of sayings among the Tai Phake people. They may be analogical or straightforward and funny. But all of them act as a forewarning or an 'I told you so.' Some examples of popular idioms are:

Ma Kho Ma Khok Makok Toi Ho
Translation: For no rhyme or reason a hog plum hits your head

This Tai Phake saying refers to the soup a person gets himself in when he involves himself with an issue that does not concern him in any way. The issue in no way relates to him, and he can avoid it and stay away from discussing it. But humans being humans, they tend to approach that very issue which ultimately leads them to trouble.

Therefore, this Tai Phake saying cautions against poking our nose in affairs that do not concern us and hence avoiding the *makok* (hog plum) from hitting our heads for no reason at all.

Chau Pa Khan Khak Mu Kam
Translation: Lazy people prepare themselves to work on *Wan Kam*

According to the Tai Phake, every eight days the friendly spirit rides around the village to ward off the negative air. Therefore, for two days (*Wan Kam*) the villagers refrain from doing any heavy work like mending fences or weeding the garden, and making any loud noise so as not to disturb him. This Tai Phake saying taunts people who are lazy and stay idle on all days and who will one day decide to work or wake up to the fact that they have to get work done. However, it would not come as a surprise if that is the day when they are not supposed to work. The saying works as a reference for all those days when we decide to do the laundry and it rains, or when we delay going to the bank and end up going the day when the bank is closed.

Pai To Chu Ten
Translation: Running from hornets nearing wasps

Wasps may be smaller than hornets but both sting. When trying to escape great distress from one person, sometimes we may approach another person who assures help and who appears safe, but the person we approach could also cause trouble, albeit of a smaller scale. The result is that we think we are safe from the bigger trouble, but we end up in trouble again.

Mu Kin Khau, Phan Thuk Hok
Translation: Pig eats rice, spear hits deer

A person commits an act and escapes while another unfortunate one gets caught for his act. A pig is shorter than a deer. Pigs can devour the rice in the fields and slip out, but the one who is visible is the deer who may have been quietly chewing grass. Thus, the spear meant for

the pig hits the deer instead. It may be difficult to judge when a person exits leaving another one in trouble, but he can avoid the company of such a person.

Riddles

Riddles (*Kham Ta)* reflect the Tai Phakes' simplistic understanding of the world and are mostly about day-to-day objects.

Table 3.2

	Translation
Phu Sao Song Ko Len Lowng La, *Pa Mao Ha Ko Len Ma Hap,* *Wati Sang?* *Wati- Sang Khi Nam Muk*	Two girls run down the slope five youths run to receive them, What is it? nasal discharge and the five fingers
Ngu Luom Non Kang Maan *Koun Mun Koun Sen Ma Laak Mau Pe* *Wati Sang?* *Wati- Khun Tang*	A python lay in the country yard, thousands of people could not drag it away, What is it? the road
Moung Miyang Pha, Miyang Mit *Ao Kon Sut Sit Po Pen Hun* *Wati Sang?* *Wati-Kung Kao*	Country without machete, without knife, Swishing and swiping its bottom, it makes its home What is it? spider

A FEMINIST READING OF TAI PHAKE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In 1975, *The Journal of American Folklore* (JAF) published a special issue on women. It carried Claire R. Farrer's article, which asked readers to consider what disciplinary biases had excluded women or

limited their participation as scholars and as tradition bearers, and how cultural stereotypes affected women's choices (Brown 1989). It cannot be denied that folklore in general has a gender bias in terms of representation and credits in terms of source, creation, retelling, and preservation. In her article Farrer says that the folklores are not at fault for the suppression of half the relevant data; folklorists and other collectors, must accept the responsibility for bias (Farrer 1979). This can be attributed to the historically patriarchal dismissive attitude towards women's role in society and their contributions in general. The representation of women in folklore—either as submissive and weak, or if strong-willed then generally as evil—can be considered a simple extension of that attitude. Thus, the image of a woman is that of homebody; her behaviour, even in areas outside the home is consistent with her image (Farrer 1979).

In the Tai Phake community, women's role was traditionally confined to around the house. Their activities included those that were conventionally expected of women and included household work, kitchen work, weaving, and bearing and rearing children. Besides this work, every Tai Phake woman helped in the rice fields during transplanting and the cropping season. Many skills and talents like weaving, chanting prayers, astrology, and performing rituals were done by women because they were day-to-day activities. Some errands were inevitable for the running of a Tai Phake household till 70-80 years ago. These errands consumed a substantial daylight time, as these tasks had to be performed during day hours. For instance, swimming to the middle of the river to fetch fresh drinking water and venturing deep into the jungle to collect medicinal herbs and roots, banana leaves, wood, or vegetables for the kitchen. Before salt became an easily and cheaply available item, it had to be harvested by boiling salt water collected from a saltwater stream. Collecting salt water from the stream sometimes took days of hiking. Relying only on the loom for clothes meant dying silk and thread for weaving. Tai Phake women therefore collected different natural elements to make the dye and

then dyed the silk. The process of preparing the loom and weaving a single apparel stretched over days. Fishing is a huge part of Tai Phake culture, and women went fishing and then set about preserving them.

Tai Phake women working on the loom. Photo by Ai Lot Hailowng

With changing times, however, there was a change in the traditional roles that women played around the house. Some roles have changed mainly because many items that were not easily available earlier, are now. The skills required to continue some errands have become obsolete. The community also adapted to the growing significance of education. Preserving traditional skills is fast becoming a part of a

global challenge of preserving fast disappearing tribes, cultures, and languages.[6] Tai Phake women have continued to engage in traditional arts and skills, but with priority given to education and higher studies, the newer generation also has less time to engage in and learn traditional skills, which clearly is a time-consuming process. Girls who have grown up in villages continue to learn and carry with them some skills of traditional arts like weaving, preparing the traditional hearth and food, and chanting prayers as a part of their social learning, but it is a struggle to accommodate them along with the continuous pressures of a fast paced society, which does not require these skills any more.

Women as preservers of Tai Phake literature, especially children's literature, was an unconscious development. Since women were children's bearers and carers their involvement with children included rearing them and entertaining them. A child learnt to repeat what his/her mother spoke and learnt to repeat lullabies and remember them as s/he grew up. This was also how girls watched and learnt the skills of survival from their mothers or grandmothers. Such an exercise meant that there was no need for the girls to learn the script. Tai Phake boys, on the other hand, as a part of the Buddhist tradition of being ordained as monks for a few years, lived in the monastery and learnt to read and write the Tai Phake script there. But the tradition of collective learning was a part of the community. There was a practice of elderly men reading the *lik* (religious texts) in the village community hall called *chung* with everyone, including women, listening to them. Such a practice ensured that everyone was well versed with the *lik*. Moral idioms were a part of a normal day-to-day conversations.

The lack of women figures in children's literature can only be attributed to the fact that nature took prominence in most forms of literature, due to which there were very few human characters in any of them. The close connection between the mother and her child is referred to in one lullaby which also details the traditional notion of a girl needing to learn weaving to impress her mother-in-law.

Table 4.1

	Translation
Mae Nai Mae Phuk Yuk	This woman, woman dishevelled
Um Luk On,	Carrying a child
Luk On Mau Nai Son Ni,	This child, you learn very well
Khun Ki To Lai Hau Chang	Learn to weave very, very well
Ma Chang Pang Lang Yap Chau Mao	You will be in trouble otherwise You will be embarrassed in front of your mother-in-law
Khon Kham Kau Na Mae Chau	
Mae Chao Khaw Cha Kha Ho Huk	Mother-in-law gets grumpy
Tak Lin Tok Tok To Ni Ko	She clicks her tongue, *tok tok,* oh! so scary

The lullaby in Table 4.1 is a Tai Phake woman's traditional understanding. The woman appears dishevelled because she is caring for her child. The girl child is expected to learn weaving. Understandably, when the Tai Phake people were confined to the boundaries of their villages, weaving was a necessity since the only source of clothing was the loom. The expectation that a girl would weave well therefore came from the mother-in-law too. Today, as a time-consuming art it is practiced lesser and lesser, but the lullaby keeps the essence of a traditional understanding of a Tai Phake woman alive.

Tai Phake women are also known to be key contributors to Tai Phake literature. For instance, there is a very popular *Khe Khyang*, composed by a woman named Am Lot Ney about 50-55 years ago. A few lines from *Khe Khyang* are given in Table 4.2.

It details events in the monsoon months of *Nun Ha* and *Nun Hok*, which according to the Gregorian calendar are April and May (the Tai Phake calendar starts in December). It describes a flood scene and what ensues when the overflowing river brings with it fallen branches, wood, and lost boats. *Mo Kham Soy Yoy* was sung by women when they congregated for threshing rice. With manual threshing of rice being practiced less and less, even the practice of singing *Soy Yoy* has decreased.

Table 4.2

	Translation
Nun Ha Nun Hok, Pha Phon tok	Month 5, month 6, rain falls
Nam Hoi Nam Hok, Lai Kang Khun	Water from the stream and water
Hung Phau Hung Mun, Tuk Non Nuk	from the river overflows at night
Sam Hau Phuk Lak, Khat Se Ma…	Each one and everyone fast asleep Three boats tied to a post, snap, and float away…

Tai Phake woman carrying her child. Photo by Am Chon Gohain

CHALLENGES IN THE PRESERVATION OF TAI PHAKE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

A traditional Tai Phake house. Photo by Ai Lot Hailowng

There is a deep link between the songs which have sustained through ages and the activities they are associated with. With traditional activities being performed less and less, their functionality has diminished as have the songs associated with them. Elders singing lullabies and telling stories with children sitting on their laps or surrounding them, was indulged in by mothers or grandparents while relaxing in the *chaan* (a stretched open annex like an open terrace, in a Tai Phake stilt house) on a quiet lazy evening while the cicadas chirped and the frogs croaked in the surrounding forests. The children would then repeat the lullabies and stories. An elder sister carrying her baby brother or sister on her back and singing a lullaby to quieten him or her while strolling around the village, was once a very common scene in Tai Phake villages. Today with many families having had to settle outside the villages for jobs or education, there are lesser chances of sustaining this practice. Although the lullabies, stories, and riddles have been preserved in texts, the organic process of learning has diminished. Attempts have been made to preserve Tai Phake children's literature in a local setup, and they are slowly being translated, but a wider recognition is essential so that they are not tampered with or stolen. Indigenous material being stolen or appropriated is a concern which must be taken as seriously as the need for their preservation.

The slow and gradual influence of the outside world on the Tai Phake community may have helped in the preservation of Tai Phake culture and literature. Even till three generations ago the jungle was enough to provide for their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. Electricity had not reached most of the Tai Phake villages even in the late 1980s. But the idea of what constitutes self-sufficiency altered with each passing generation, and their way of life changed to accommodate the changing world. The community adapted to going to school and pursuing higher education. Today, the Tai Phake people are exposed to the modern outside world and also have a very high literacy rate. Exposure also meant a general growing awareness of the significance attached to maintaining and learning traditional arts and skills. Even though it will be impossible to live the old way, this will at least not be forgotten, and attempts are being made to maintain as much of it as possible. Life has come full circle in way.

Preservation of old traditions and cultures is an economic challenge that must be realised. Unless there is a way for the village community to sustain itself economically in a village setup, the skills and art which have a chance of being preserved will be lost. Education and employment should not force people to leave the villages. Preservation of culture is connected to the land and the way of life. Uprooting them will be the death knell for any surviving indigenous cultures around the world. The world must wake up to understand the need for redefining the idea of development which has forced communities to uproot themselves from their land. The wish to preserve one's own indigenous culture should not mean sacrificing one's economic upliftment. And seeking economic upliftment should not entail leaving one's ancestral land. The Tai Phakes lived off the land for generations. They were and are farmers, but with decreasing incentives in farming, they are unconsciously and consciously adapting to other jobs which take them away from their villages. The connection between preservation of culture and the economy is therefore closely related.

It has fallen on the new generation to find the balance between maintaining the old ways of the Tai Phake and a fast-changing social environment.
Photo by Pow Aim Hailowng

CONCLUSION

Tai Phake children's literature was mostly composed hundreds of years ago when the Tai Phake people were still migrating. Therefore, several places find reference in this literature which are not in India. These act as a reference point for a greater Asian connection. The Tai Phake people are only a section of the people from among the larger Tai race present in present day China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Their literature is also a rich reflection of the way of life of the Tai Phakes which has changed from the old ways only in the last 50-60 years as they have adapted.

Tai Phake people playing the traditional instrument 'Mung'.
Photo by Wonkyo Weingken

Tai Phake women in front of the Buridihing river, Namphake village.
Photo by Pow Aim Hailowng

Several flora, fauna, and fruits mentioned in Tai Phake children's literature were indigenous to their surroundings. Many are on the verge of being forgotten. Tai Phake children's literature preserves this knowledge. References to animals and birds like porcupines, wagtails, and water hen help pique children's interest in their existence, which could also lead to a larger awareness about conservation. The simplicity of the content is a testimony to the fact that children do not always have to be fed with sophisticated content for entertaining them. Children today are much smarter and brighter because of the access that they have to everything happening in the world, which has expanded their outlook towards life. The essence of Tai Phake children's literature is its simplicity. To understand and appreciate the

simplicity of the content of Tai Phake children's literature we will have to imagine a child living in the midst of dense forests, where the chatter of birds, the prowling of animals, and nature is all that s/he hears and sees every day. Understandably, a Tai Phake child's imagination has not extended beyond the contents of the forest. What was conjured for entertainment was, thus, nature's work and even that sounded fun.

Tong Pha Neng, Mengken Hong,
The evening sky is red, the cicada chirps
Ma San Khu Cha, Hong Pung! Pung!
The dillenia fruit is grumpy, Falls Pung! Pung!
Ai Khun Khet Ai
O frog prince

A fast-paced world makes returning to Tai Phake children's literature more significant because it points towards a simplicity of entertainment, which could help humans slow down and enjoy the little things, at least for some time. But more importantly, *Mo Kham Lao Luk, Pung* and *Kham Ta* still bring joy and glee to Tai Phake children as well as Tai Phake adults.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Am Chon Gohain and Ai Lot Hailowng for providing information about the Tai Phake community and Tai Phake children's literature. Am Chon Gohain was a Teaching Assistant at the Tai Section, Center for Studies in Language in Dibrugarh University for 20 years from 2000-2020.Ai Lot Hailowng is an active member of the Tai Phake Community who has worked tirelessly towards the preservation of the Tai Phake heritage. He has been working on a Tai Phake dictionary for the past 10 years. They are also my loving parents. The writing of this article would not have been possible without their help.
2. The term Phake/Phakes is used interchangeably and means the Tai Phake people.
3. Village.

4. Tai Phake words used in this article do not carry the exact English spellings and pronunciations.
5. A place where Tai Phake resided once upon a time.
6. Forty-three per cent of the estimated 6,000 languages spoken in the world are endangered. This number does not include the languages whose number of speakers is not reported in the UNESCO Atlas (http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap).

REFERENCES

Brown, Mary Ellen. 1989. 'Women, Folklore and Feminism', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 26 (3): 259–264.

Farrer, Claire R. 1975. 'Introduction: Women and Folklore: Images and Genres', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (347): v–xv.

Gohain, Am Chon. 2001. 'Axomor Tai Phake luko xahityor kiso abhax', in Dr. S. Mahanta Chaudhury, Dr. P. Deka Buzarbaruah (eds.) *Axomor jonogustio luko xahityo*, pp. 21–40. Dibrugarh: Assamese Department, Dibrugarh University.

McDowell, Myles. 1973. 'Fiction for Children and Adults: Some Essential Differences', *Children's Literature in Education*, 4 (1): 50–63.

Nodelman, Perry. 2008. *The Hidden Adult Defining Children's Literature.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sale, Roger. 1978. *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White*. USA: Harvard University Press.