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Visiting linguistics professor first to document hill tribes

By B.J. Thomsen
Of the Emerald

A pioneering expert in cataloging and translating never-before-studied languages of the hill tribes of northern Thailand is completing her visiting professorship in the University linguistics department this term.

Suriya Ratanakul, a leading expert in Southeast Asian minority cultures and languages, has spent the 1986-87 academic year teaching in the United States as the Fulbright-Hays Curriculum Consultant in Southeast Asian Studies at the University and two other schools in the Northwest.

While at the University linguistics department, she is teaching a graduate course in the structure of Southeast Asian languages, which deals with the five major linguistic families of Southeast Asia, she said.

She spent fall term at Eastern Washington University and from here will go to Western Oregon State College in Monmouth before returning home to Bangkok after spring term where she plans to continue studying and documenting the four northern tribes she has worked with since 1971.

Ratanakul first came to the United States in 1975 to present a paper at the University of California at Berkeley and has been back several times to present papers at universities around the country on various aspects of the tribes she has studied.

This is her second visit to the University. She was here first in 1984 to deliver a paper at the 17th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, which the University hosted.

Ratanakul got first class honors when she graduated from Chulalongkorn University



Suriya Ratanakul

published their doctoral dissertations on various aspects of the hill tribe languages since she founded the department, she said, and noted that she requires they be published in English. This makes the information more accessible to scholars around the world, she said.

Many of the tribes she is studying have only moved into the area 200 years ago from Burma, Laos and southern parts of China and range in size from only about 12,000 people in the Lawa tribe to 200,000 in the Sqwa Karen tribe, she said.

The Lawa tribe is the most poetic of the four, she said, and because of that she has translated and published much of their literature, poetry and folklore.

Since beginning her work in the northern rain forests of her homeland she has compiled and published four dictionaries documenting four separate hill tribe languages.

These dictionaries facilitate better communication between the tribes and the government, which is trying bring health care, sanitation and modern agriculture to the remote villages. One is designed specifically for doctors who do not speak the native language and need to communicate with the people they are trying to help.

In the dry season she travels to the villages and lives with the people for several months taping conversations, learning the language, and compiling data, which she will study and record when she returns to Chulalongkorn University during the rainy season.

Ratanakul has published nearly 40 articles about the hill tribe languages in scholarly journals and written seven books on the subject.

in 1967.

The King of Thailand, Rama IX, asked her if she would go to the University of Paris on the King's Scholarship and study linguistics so she could help the government bring the Thai language to the northern provinces.

She did and in 1970 Ratanakul received her Ph.D. in far eastern languages from the University of Paris.

"The king said he wanted me to concentrate my efforts on doing something useful for the country," she said. "At that time there were not many linguists (if any) who worked with the hill tribe languages. The government was trying to bring literacy into the tribes in the north of Thailand."

She is the founding director of the Institute of Language, Culture and Development at Mahidol University in Bangkok, and many students have since followed in her footsteps and are conducting their own research on hill tribe languages.

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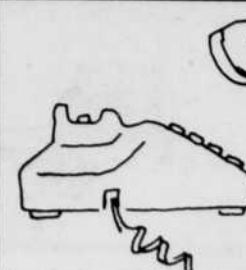


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