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*Rare Books and Manuscripts Section
& Asia and Oceania Section*

**Preserving Sri Lanka's Traditional Manuscript Culture: Role of the Palm Leaf
Digitization Project of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya.**

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Abstract

Introduction

Processed Palm leaves have been the primary writing material in Sri Lanka, perhaps from 540 BC to early 19th century. Limited use of palm leaves for writing letters, orders and messages in early period grew into a manuscript culture with the introduction of Buddhism to the country in 3rd century BC. Preparation of palm leaves for writing, writing on blank leaves and making books, copying, distribution and safe keeping of books, creation and maintenance of libraries and user communities can be seen as the main features of this culture. Palm leaf manuscripts represent the knowledge generated within Sri Lanka until the propagation of printed books in the country. Copies of these manuscripts are scattered throughout the temples and private collections. Some of them have been collected in a few local and foreign libraries.

Need for preservation

Collapse of the traditional infrastructure due to the occupation of western powers in the country for more than 500 years most of these manuscripts had been left unattended and no concerted effort had been taken to preserve them other than some ad hoc attempts to compile bibliographies. Thus a considerable number of manuscripts have been completely destroyed. The rest is also fast deteriorating due to natural as well as man-made reasons. Thus it has become an imperative to conserve and preserve this valuable store house of knowledge for the use of future generations.

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Project and its objectives

Having identified the importance of the preservation of this knowledge base recently the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka established a Palm leaf Manuscript Study and Research Library with the intention of preserving palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka by means of digitization and to develop a digital library enabling interested users to have access to the digitized resources. Preservation of manuscripts acquired as donations and purchases is also an objective of the project. Both tangible copies and digitized copies will be catalogued, classified, indexed with abstracts. Project seeks to copy all types of palm leaf manuscripts irrespective of their subject coverage.

Current Progress and Future Plans of the Project

To date, manuscripts which were available in forty (40) temples and five (05) private collections have been examined and over hundred thousand (100,000) pages have been digitized. Three (03) private collections and two (02) temple collections have been already donated to the Library. The project is entirely funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences. Bibliographic tools such as catalogs, indexes and other useful materials also are collected in the Library. A website has been already developed with introductory details and the database of digitized manuscripts will be online in due course. DSpace software platform is used to create the digital library by following Meta data standards drawn from Dublin Core.

Problems Encountered and Sustainability of the Project

The project encounters following problems at present:

- Owners are reluctant to handover manuscripts for digitization
- Lack of infrastructure (e.g. electricity) in remote areas in digitizing manuscripts on-site
- Lack of locally available technology for digitization purposes
- Severe budget constraints
- Lack of trained people who can read and interpret manuscripts

Keywords: Palm-leaf manuscripts –Conservation and restoration; Palm-leaf manuscripts – Digitization; Palm-leaf manuscripts –Sri Lanka