

**MANAGEMENT, CONSERVATION AND  
PRESERVATION OF PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS:  
A RESEARCH STUDY BASED ON  
SELECTED COLLECTIONS  
IN SRI LANKA**

A thesis submitted

By

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## Abstract

A survey of the palm-leaf manuscript collections was carried out in order to find out the maintenance, present physical condition, problems relating to the preservation and conservation of the collections, the ancient and modern preservation and conservation methods that applied to safeguard the manuscripts from flaws, and the available preservation programmes and user attitudes of above factors in Sri Lanka.

The concentrations of the largest collections of palm-leaf manuscript in Sri Lanka are the Department of National Museums, University of Peradeniya and Department of National Archives. 10% of each collection was selected as sample of the study and a simple random sampling method was applied. Altogether, 717 manuscripts were taken to study the physical condition of the collections. The environmental conditions of the repositories were observed by using a record sheet. Further, a questionnaire was sent to all heads of the departments and librarians to identify the existing administrative problems. User attitude test was also carried out in order to find out the attitudes regarding the usage, maintenance and preservation of palm-leaves. Data analysis was done by using SPSS, Binomial Distribution and ANOVA between group and within group variability.

The survey of visual observation and the viva-voce interviews revealed the following findings of the study.

According to the environmental survey of the buildings which palm-leaf manuscripts are stored revealed that, most flaws of the manuscripts have taken place due to lack of

awareness of the condition of the storage area, lack of experts in the field and equipment to under control the hazards of the environment of the stack areas of some repositories.

In the management process, application of new technology is not much practiced due to non availability of the infrastructure and the trained personnel in these repositories. Both practical and deterioration problems are the realized challenges to the management of these repositories, in preserving and conserving this cultural heritage.

The physical condition survey assisted to identify the following findings of the study. More than 60% of the collection need wooden boards and 87% need the cotton yarn for the manuscripts. Surface discolouration of the leaves was the significant problem of these collections and 140, 92 and 22 of the manuscripts have discoloured due to uncontrolled hazards of these 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> repositories respectively.

In the absence of air-conditioners and dehumidifiers, insect attacks are also highly visible in these collections and the survey revealed that, 113, 52 and 19 manuscripts were damaged from this attack in these three repositories. Due to non availability of wooden boards, damages of edges were also high which amounts to 90, 74 and 19 respectively in the three repositories. Due to uncontrolled temperature, the split and peeling of the surface layer of the leaves also could be seen in 72, 43 and 15 manuscripts of these collections. Pagination of the manuscripts were not in the correct order and the lack of experts in the field was the severe problem to the task. More than 100 manuscripts should have to be repaired in the two repositories which are amounting to 150 and 145 respectively in the first two repositories.

According to the conservation problems, though some of the repositories have conservation units and trained personnel with required equipment, some have the scarcity of these necessities. In Sri Lanka, there were no adequate training programmes to educate the conservation staff and no trained personnel and the experts in the field. The foreign training has been received only by the government sector and therefore, the modern techniques of conservation also have been practiced only in them in Sri Lanka.

The user attitude results of usage, maintenance and preservation also compatible with the analysed results of physical condition of the manuscripts of these repositories.

There are certain factors contributed for the non availability of these preservation requirements. They are financial constraints, lack of trained personnel, lack of equipment, absence of facilities, lack of know-how of the modern methods and established preservation policies for these repositories.

Recommendations were made according to the results of the survey to control and minimize the flaws of the factors that affected to the manuscripts. These included formulation of workable preservation and conservation policies, create more facilities to get preservation and conservation training programmes and practical workshops, establishment of conservation units and cleaning programmes. Suggestions were made to designate a collection in-charge for the repositories and assignment of their duties. It is compulsory to get advice from the reputed conservation department in the country or from the Department of National Archives.