

THE CONTRIBUTION OF BUDDHIST MONKS IN THE PREPARATION OF PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPTS

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Abstract

In the past, writing on palm leaf manuscripts has been a rich and enduring tradition in Sri Lanka, and these manuscripts are among the country's foremost historical sources. However, natural palm leaves are not suitable for scribing, and it is a challenging task to make them suitable for writing. Several steps must be taken to writing a palm leaf manuscript, from marking the palm tree for palm leaves to writing on the palm leaf using a steel point and blackening it. The contribution of Buddhist monks in this respect has been very high since ancient times, from the first century B.C. The leaf was the normal material on which Sri Lankan books were written. However, a review of investigations, research articles, and surveys on the subject showed that there was no discussion of Buddhist monks' potential contributions to many aspects of the process of creating palm leaf manuscripts. Therefore, the study aimed to investigate in detail the contribution of Buddhist monks to the preparation of palm leaf manuscripts. Sources such as books, journal articles, conference papers, websites and case studies published on palm leaf manuscripts were used to conduct this literature review. All literature selected for research was analysed based on the process of preparing palm leaf manuscripts. After the Tripitaka was written completely in the text on the palm leaves in the first century BC at *Aluvihara* (also known as *Alokavihara* in Pali), many palm leaf manuscripts were prepared and spread throughout the island. In Sri Lanka, a lot of Tipitaka manuscripts are written in the Pali language using Sinhalese characters. It is evident from the analytical literature that both laypeople and priests worked at the temple to prepare the palm leaf manuscripts. However, the study revealed that Buddhist monks have made significant contributions to the writing of palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka and that the preparation of palm leaf manuscripts is a Buddhist religious activity. Large-scale religious writing first appeared in the country when Ven. Buddhaghosa composed the *Aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries) in the fifth century AD. The Buddhist manuscripts such as *Chullavaggaya* and *Visuddhimaggaṭīkā*, *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna-sutta*, *Abhidhammapīṭaka*, *Dhammapada atthakatha*, *Dhammapada*, *Dighanikaya*, *Theragāthā* and *Vimānavatthu* show that the Buddhist monks have contributed to the creation of Buddhist manuscripts by widely using palm leaves.

Keywords: Buddhist monks, Palm-leaf manuscripts, Manuscripts preparation, Tipitaka

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Introduction

Before the invention of paper, palm leaves were a common and significant writing material used throughout South and Southeast Asia. Palm leaves were among the earliest writing materials used in coastal nations such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India (Agrawal 2006). Palm leaf manuscripts are prepared using palm (*Borassus flabelliformis*) leaves or Talipot palm (*Corypha umbraculifera*) leaves through the traditional process. Ancient written records known as palm leaf manuscripts were created using a "stylus" on palm leaves. These texts may last for over a thousand years. A manuscript is typically considered a handwritten document, in contrast to a printed one. Worldwide, more than a million palm leaf manuscripts have been found. The tradition of palm leaf manuscripts is deeply intertwined with religion and culture. Palm leaf manuscripts, created over many hundreds of years by Buddhist monks in Ceylon, circulated widely. These manuscripts were made of densely bound palm leaves and were written in Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhala, and other languages. However, two distinct methods can be identified in the context of palm leaf writing. Those are

- *Mahāsampradāya*
- *Chūlasampradāya* (Ranasinghe, 2010)

Mahāsampradāya is similar to the massive tradition of palm leaf manuscripts, and *chūlasampradāya* is similar to the small tradition. However, the religious manuscripts, sutta, grammar, jāta stories, and the other lengthy descriptive sources belong to the '*Mahāsampradāya*'. Commonly those are big palm leaf manuscripts. The palm leaf manuscripts, which belong to the fields of medicine (human and animal), astrology, amulets and chants, snake physicians, black magic, etc., are categorised under '*Chūlasampradāya*'. Those are small manuscripts in the palm leaf manuscript culture in Sri Lanka. These writings on palm leaves are regarded as our historical written messengers. These manuscripts are regarded as important sources of information for reconstructing a nation's history and culture since they retain our ancient cultural legacy. This paper provides a literature review on various aspects of preparing palm leaf manuscripts.

Palm leaf manuscripts are ancient documents inscribed on palm leaf sheets using a sharp blade or knife. Due to the natural flexibility of palm leaves, these manuscripts are highly durable and can survive for over a thousand years (Thairat, 2013). Additionally, palm leaves used to be the primary traditional support material for writing and decorative illuminations in several Southeast Asian countries and the Indian subcontinent (Freeman, 2005). In countries like India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia, palm leaves were the most common writing and drawing medium before the introduction of paper (Agrawal, 1984). Further he states that the process of seasoning palm leaves is common in South Asian countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. In Sri Lanka, the usual practice is first to boil fresh young palm leaves in water or sometimes in limewater for a few hours, and then the leaves are dried in the shade, and the leaves are cut to the required size. According to Weerasinghe (2019), Sri Lanka had an ancient tradition of writing, and early Sri Lankans used palm leaves as a medium for writing. As a result, palm leaf manuscripts were spread throughout the island. Palm Leaf Manuscripts, known as "Ola Leaves," formalised the initiative in ancient Sri Lanka. According to Cabral & Rathnabahu (2021), palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka are prepared scientifically from refined *Corypha umbraculifera* leaves.

A large number of manuscripts on Buddhism are in temples. The manuscripts are cherished and well-preserved, as they enshrine the Buddhist doctrine and canonical literature. Since the Anuradhapura kingdom, for almost all the writing, palm leaf manuscripts were used. Somananda and Weerasinghe (2021) trace the history of ancient Sri Lankan manuscript traditions to the arrival of Arahath Mahinda Thero. The event known as the "Mahindagamanaya" marked a pivotal turning point in Sri Lankan history, leading to the widespread adoption of writing. Initially, palm leaf manuscripts were used primarily for writing commentaries. During the reign of King Walagamba (89-77 BC), canonical commentaries were written down on palm leaves at Mathale Aloka Viharaya, which signifies an important milestone in Sri Lanka's writing tradition. It added a new dimension to the Sri Lankan art of writing. This royal patronage fostered the growth of Sinhala writing, especially around temples, where palm leaf manuscripts enriched the Pothgula (libraries). The religious palm leaf manuscripts, wamsakathā, etc., were written on palm leaf manuscripts (Weerabahu, 2019). Accordingly, in the first century B.C., evidence that was passed down orally from generation to generation in the form of Buddhist texts was recorded under the patronage of kings and under the guidance of Buddhist monks. According to Wijenayake (1995), the *Kotte* era is considered the "Golden Age" of Sinhala literature. Some of the chronicles and Kavyas produced during that period are Weedagama Maithree Thero's *Buduguna Alankaraya* and *Hamsa-Sandeshaya*, *Wimalakitti Maha Sthavira's Kawyashakaraya*, *Parevi Sandeshaya*, *Salalihini Sandeshaya*, and *Perakumba Siritha* written by *Thotagamuwe Sri Rahula* Thero (Ilangasinghe, 2003). In addition to the new set of documents, many parchment manuscripts were used to copy from the original sets. These manuscripts are invaluable sources containing a great deal of knowledge and wisdom, which were acquired over thousands of years as a result of experiments and experiences. A large amount of information can be revealed from these manuscripts regarding Buddhism, history, indigenous

medicine, veterinary science, ancient technology, astrology, astronomy, demonology, language and literature, social condition, and economic status. The village temple seems to have motivated the lay party to engage in this art of writing. Because of this, literacy was at a high level.

Ranasinghe (2013) mentions that it was observed that the prevailing listening tradition, an unavoidable consequence of the oral past, was further strengthened by this manuscript culture. Another reason Sri Lankans hold literature in such high regard is the influence of the manuscript subculture, which personified Dhamma in manuscript form on par with Buddha and Sangha. Manuscripts written on palm leaves that recorded the Dhamma were initially regarded as sacred objects; eventually, this belief spread to other types of manuscripts. There are several ways of processing palm leaves; these methods differ from region to region. In South India, different methods are adopted, whereas in Orissa and other Southeast Asian countries, different techniques are adopted. Furthermore, the current study is based on published sources and examines the process of palm leaf manuscript creation by Sri Lankan researchers from 1969 to 2023. As a result, it aims to address an existing research gap.

Methodology

This study used research papers on palm leaf manuscripts published in national and international resources. Specifically, it includes research papers published on the process of creating palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka, research articles, books, and proceedings of conferences, commemorative volumes, and case studies of various manuscript repositories that have appeared during a period of coverage starting from 1969 to 2023. During the literature search, subject-specific and search terms such as “palm leaf manuscript preparing process” and “palm leaf manuscript writing” were used to identify relevant literature. This study focused on published resources about creating palm leaf manuscripts. Some databases and websites were used to locate the photos of the palm leaf manuscript writing process. This study used a desk research method. In the literature review, sources directly extracted from previous studies were analysed based on the process of preparing palm leaf manuscripts. The literature was analysed using a content analysis.

Results and Discussion

The process of preparing palm leaf manuscripts

Preparing manuscripts from palm leaves is a traditional technological method that has been passed down through the generations for a very long time and is connected to certain ceremonies and customs. This process ensured the long existence of the manuscripts without decay from environmental factors. There are some small differences in the preparation process, which vary according to the region of the writers, but cannot be taken seriously in a broad sense. However, natural palm leaves are not suitable for writing on palm leaf manuscripts. It has to be made suitable for writing, and it is a very difficult task. Several steps must be taken to create a palm leaf manuscript. That is, to mark the palm tree for palm leaves and to select the palm bud (*Thala Gobaya*), cut the palm bud (*Thala Gobaya*), remove the midribs, and make rolls (*Vattu*); the rolls are boiled in a pot with medicinal leaves, and the boiled leaves are dried in a cool place; the palm leaves are seasoned (the leaf blade pulls up and down over the smooth surface of a cylinder of wood); the manuscript pages (folios) are cut from palm leaves; the edges of the pages are burnt with a hot iron to remove any irregularities; the leaves are strung together and punched with holes; and writing is done on the palm leaf using a steel point and blackened. Additionally, *Kamba* (covers for the manuscripts) is made for the palm leaf manuscripts.

Choosing palm tree and palm bud (*Thala Gobaya*) for the preparation of leaves

Gunawardene (1997) points out that, in ancient times, not all people were literate, and so manuscript writing was confined to the elite, the learnt people who were mostly monks. They enjoyed the patronage of the king and were able to wield enormous authority not only in religious matters but also in politics and social affairs. Some pious kings lavished riches on manuscript writers as an act of piety and gave an impetus to manuscript writing. The Mahavihara, Abeyagiri, and Jetawana monasteries were famous centres of learning. Further, she stated that the leaf material on which they wrote was like the talipot and palmyra palm from the third to fifth centuries A.D.; leaf material was the normal material on which Sri Lankan books were written. "We are informed that these books were made of some leaf-like tala, talipot, or palmyra palms. It is said that the king was asked by the monks to prepare a hall and supply the leaves for the books" Godakumbura (1980).

Indika (2011) state that young Talipot or Palmyra palm fronds or leaves are used to make palm leaf manuscripts. The Talipot palm is the subject of the majority of Sri Lanka's palm leaf manuscripts. The Talipot palm's frond is more than 10 feet long and has 80-100 sections. Just one or two days prior to the full dark or *Amavaka Poya* day, it should be cut. This procedure has a strong scientific foundation, which helped extend the manuscripts' longevity and reduce the activity of insects. Alahakoon (2012) states that the palm tree *Corypha umbraculifera*, which is used for manuscripts, has 205 kinds and is referred to as "*pus-kola*" in Sri Lanka. Manuscripts are made from the palm tree's young or unripe buds. When the tree is small, the first step is to identify a proper tree, which is done

by someone who is educated about such things. In order to cut the palm bud, the selected palm tree is allowed to ripen to the proper size until the auspicious days. Two or three days prior to the monthly *Pōya* day are regarded as auspicious days. The people also think that if the palm leaf bud is clipped before nightfall, the leaves will sustain less damage. The labour activities involved are performed with a sense of ceremonial purity, according to Alahakon (2012). The person chosen to carry out the rites starts by presenting the tree with flowers and lamps. Initiating the process by formally requesting "permission from the tree" and wearing white, the individual observes the five precepts and begins the next day at the auspicious time chosen by the astrologer. Buddhist monks recite sacred hymns during these events. Following that, the palm leaf bud is ceremoniously treated while traditional music is played on the kettledrum (*daula*), double drum (*tammattama*), and drums (*maṅgul bera*). The astrologer, the drummer, a Buddhist monk, and a layperson (*gihiya*) are important individuals in this ceremony. The ceremony is carried out in accordance with Buddhist customs (Lagamuwa, 2006). Indika (2011), Bandara (2020), and Lagamuwa (2006) state that, before climbing the palm tree in veneration, it is treated to worship. From the top of the tree, (Fig.1) this leaf bud is carefully cut and carried down.



Figure 01: Cutting the palm bud and carrying it down

In all the rituals, such as choosing the palm tree, choosing the palm bud, and cutting the palm bud, the monks have taken the initiative and performed all the rituals with religious fervour.

Removing the midrib and making rolls (Vattu)

Indika (2011) explains that each leaf's midrib is cut off, resulting in flexible strips that are rolled into *vattu* (rolls) in concentric circles. '*Vattu*' is the term for the circular shape formed by rolling the palm leaves (Fig. 2) with the midrib removed (Alahakoon, 2012; De Silva, 1969; Kulasuriya, 1996; Lagamuwa, 2006; Bandara, 2020; Gunawardhana, 1997).



Figure 02: "Vattu" made by rolling palm leaves

Boiling rolls (vattu) with medicinal leaves

Alahakoon (2007) states that the rolled palm leaves (*Vattu*) need to be boiled (Fig.3). For this, unripe pineapple leaves (*Ananas comosus*) and papaya and its leaves (*Carica papaya*), beli leaves and its fruits (marmelos), *Kāppetiyā* leaves (*Crotolaria retusa*), *pinna* leaves (*Clerodendrum pholomidiss*), or *Bombu* leaves (*Symplocos cordifolia*), paddy, pure water, a copper pot, and a few pieces of wood are required (Alahakoon, 2012). According to Lagamuwa (2006) and Indika (2011), then the leaf rolls are placed in a large vessel filled with water. Papaya (*Carica papaya*) leaves and crude papaya, pineapple leaves (*Annas comossus merri*), *bilin* (*Ailantus malabarica*), and *Kappetiya* (*Croton Iacciferus*) leaf branches are added. Bandara (2020) mentions that *Croton* (*Croton Iacciferus*) leaves, papaya (*Carica papaya*) leaves and raw papaya, and pineapple leaves (*Annas comossus merri*) have been used.



Figure 03: Boiling rolled palm leaves (vattu) together with leaves from medicinal plants

Drying the leaves in a cool place and tanning them

According to Bandara (2020) and Alahakoon (2012), after the palm leaves have been unrolled, they are hung on a thread in single strips and allowed to dry for three or more days in the gentle sun (Fig, 4). After wetting and washing the palm leaf strips in the evening, they are then left out in the dew for three days.



Figure 04: Drying palm leaves under gentle sunshine

The polishing of palm leaf strips is the next stage in the manuscript preparation process. Six feet above the ground, it is fastened to rods. On either side of the leaf strip, stones weighing roughly two pounds are tied. The leaf strip is placed above the wooden pole and rubbed up and down until it is flattened (Fig,5). The strips are all made flat in a similar manner. One end of the palm leaf is weighed down during the polishing process using a stone known as the "*padi-gala*" or "polishing stone" (Piyadasa, 1985). "*Hema-kanda*" is the name of the tree that is used to polish palm leaves. When palm leaves are polished, they have a creamy, smooth surface that is perfect for writing. In temples and monasteries, the younger monks enthusiastically participate and support these activities (Alahakoon, 2023).



Figure 05 : The process of polishing palm leaves

Preparing leaves and Writing

Another unique process is the volume preparation of palm leaf strips. Leaf strips ranging from eight to thirty-two inches long and 2 to 2 3/4 inches wide are cut to the appropriate standard size depending on the subject to be written on them, states Kulasuriya (1996). In accordance with tradition, a hot iron rod is used to punch two holes in each leaf strip. A hot iron rod is used to singe the edges of the leaf strips after they have been firmly pushed together. In addition to ensuring uniform leaf folio size, this process also provides pest and humidity protection. After the blank palm leaves are finally ready, writing is begun at an auspicious time. These prepared palm leaves are written on using two different kinds of styli. They are the sharp stylus (*Panhiñda*) and the blunt stylus (*Ulkatuva*) (Alahakoon, 2012). This quill has a steel tip and a handle made of metal, wood, or ivory. Writing manuscripts is a specialised craft, and the incising was done with the stylus's pointed edge (Fig, 6). The scribe kept the leaf strip on the hand and used the left thumb, which was placed on top of the leaf; he guided the quill along the lines. Beginners use the *Ulkatuva*, a relatively simple writing instrument devoid of ornamentation, to practice writing (Bandara, 2020). A chief Buddhist monk of a temple primarily instructs trainees on how to apply the blunt stylus to a palm leaf and how deeply to place it on the leaf.



Figure 06: Palm leaf writing using Panhiñda

Blackening of the letters

Indika (2011) claims that because the letters carved with the stylus are colourless, they are challenging to read. Therefore, it must be blackened in a specific manner. It is called *kalumadeema*. The *gaduma* tree's finely ground charcoal is combined with *dummala* or *kekuna* oil, and the carved surface is cleaned with finely ground millet flour or rice bran. This procedure made the palm leaf's letters seem dark black and made the words easier to read (Fig, 7). Alahakoon (2012) asserts that to make the letters readable, they must be embossed by blackening. Blackening enhances the manuscript's readability and durability. We use a variety of substances for blackening, such as *gaduma* charcoal and oils like resin oil. Bandara (2020) states that the writing on the palm leaf manuscripts is not legible. Therefore, a mixture of *kākuna* oil and *dummala* (resin) oil blackens them. This is known as *Nethra Pinkama*.



Figure 07: A blackened palm leaf manuscript

The folios are bound together with a string that is put through their openings. Then, using the same string, palm leaf manuscript covers or *kamba* made of wood, metal, or ivory are tied to both sides of the manuscript (Fig, 8). Ultimately, the string was wound using a conventional technique. During the wrapping procedure, Buddhist monks sometimes chant special verses. Manuscripts were carefully preserved and occasionally wrapped in fabric that had been soaked in herbal water. Manuscript boxes and cupboards were built from a special kind of wood that is resistant to insects. People held Buddhist doctrinal manuscripts in high regard, handled them with dignity, and carried them on their heads.



Figure 08: Wrapping procedure with wooden kamba

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study attempted to gather information on the contributions of Buddhist monks from the beginning of the preparation of palm leaves to the completion of the manuscript creation by examining articles that were published about the manuscript writing. According to the published literature, the focus has been primarily on the creation of palm leaf manuscripts, the preservation of palm leaves, manuscript writing and writing styles, paintings on manuscripts and their characteristics, existing collections, palm leaf manuscript catalogues, and the temples and places where these manuscripts are stored. However, there is a lack of written documentation and discussion regarding the various stages of the manuscript creation process, the tools used, the technical aspects, and the contributions of the Buddhist monks. More specifically, there is insufficient written documentation or discussion about the various roles Buddhist monks play in the preparation, decoration, and creation of manuscripts. This research has focused on highlighting this gap. Accordingly, it has been possible to gain a broader understanding that Sri Lanka has a rich tradition of manuscript production. However, Buddhist monks made a significant contribution to the use of writing in Sri Lanka. After the Tripitaka was enshrined in the Matale *Aloka Vihara*, a large number of palm leaf manuscripts spread throughout the island. A strong literary tradition was built in the country, covering a wide range of subjects, including Dharma, grammar, literature, mantras, medical palm leaf manuscripts, and the contributions of monks. The practice of writing on palm leaves, centred on the village temple, has also received support from the laity. In the fifth century AD, Ven. *Buddhaghosa* composed the *Aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries), which marked the beginning of large-scale religious writing in the country. Buddhist manuscripts, including *Chullavaggaya* and *Visuddhimaggaṭīkā*, *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, *Abhidhammapiṭaka*, *Dhammapada atthakatha*, *Dhammapada*, *Dighanikaya*, *Theragāthā*, and *Vimānavatthu*, demonstrate the widespread use of palm leaves by Buddhist monks. The tradition of palm leaf manuscripts is deeply intertwined with religion and culture. These manuscripts are considered important sources of information for reconstructing the history and culture of a nation because they preserve our ancient cultural heritage. This study provides a literature review on the contribution of Buddhist monks to various aspects of the manuscript creation process, examining the published literature on manuscript writing from the beginning of manuscript preparation to the completion of manuscript creation.

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