

Noolaham Foundation
Project Report



Project Title	Manuscripts Archive Pilot Project 2012
Project Number	NF/PG/2012/0002
Project Location	Jaffna
Sector	Manuscripts Archive - Ola leaf
Implementing agency and contribution	Noolaham Foundation (NF)
Grant Agency and Contribution	Noolaham Foundation
Total Budget and Expenditure	Not Recorded
Project Period	2012
Responsible Stakeholders	Seran Sivananthamoorthy, Federal Assistance Award, French institute of Pondicherry, EAP 458 Team, Volunteers of Noolaham Foundation

Summary

The **Manuscripts Archive Pilot Project 2012** was carried out by Noolaham Foundation in 2012 to establish the *Manuscripts Archive Program* of the Foundation. While conducting *Documentation and Archiving of Rare Endangered Documents* project, Noolaham Foundation came across a number of palm-leaf manuscript collections in Jaffna. The flatbed scanners which were being used at that time were not suitable to scan such fragile documents. Thus a pilot project was implemented to evaluate feasibility, time, cost, adverse events, and effect size (statistical variability) of digitizing manuscripts and to establish a Manuscripts Archive Program.

Noolaham Foundation acquired the expertise and received training from EAP 458 team based at the French institute of Pondicherry, India. EAP 458 Team was carrying out a project under the British Library's Endangered Archive Program. A small sample of ola leaf volumes were also digitized during the project. This project was a successful initiative and received special appreciation from scholars.

Introduction and Background

In Sri Lanka, there exist a vast number of medieval and late modern Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts held by individuals and organizations. Sri Lanka possesses one of the richest unbroken literary traditions of the world, going back thousands of years, began before the dawn of the Christian era. Palm leaf manuscripts had been remained as the dominant writing material of the country from the earliest times to the 20 century A.D. These manuscripts were prepared by a traditional technological process incorporated with some cultural practices, utilizing Palmyra Palm leaf. These palm-leaf manuscripts cover a variety of subjects including traditional medicine, law, history, technology and religion. Majority of

these works have not been published in print. In addition, there exists an array of contemporary handwritten manuscripts such as notebooks, letters and diaries.

At present, these manuscripts are perishing very quickly due to a number of environmental factors and human activities. Writing on palm leaf manuscripts and associated traditional technological and cultural activities will completely disappear very soon. A vast amount of palm leaf manuscripts have been already lost. Unfortunately, manuscripts which were venerated in the past are sold to foreigners as antiques and aesthetic objects and become their properties. On the other hand, palm leaf manuscripts are deteriorated mainly as a result of humidity, activities of termites and rats and negligence. In order to safeguard this ancient tradition of palm leaf manuscript writing it is necessary to revitalize this ancient tradition by disseminating the technical know-how of producing such manuscripts and also by redefining its potential uses in the contemporary society.

But it was a great challenge to them to preserve the knowledge recorded on palm leaves from deterioration. Jaffna was the land of scholars, teaching and studies and had a rich tradition in preserving ancient knowledge in the form of palm leaves. A large number of manuscripts were perished irrecoverably, and lost many of these kinds over the past years. In a number of personal, institutions and temples the palm leaf manuscripts are hung and covered with robes as there are no proper places to keep them. Most of them are not even read. Thus those with archaeological degrees and who are conversant with the language will be assigned to computerize the content.

Preservation of palm leaves manuscript was the biggest challenge faced by its' custodians all the times. From the time when the palm leaves were prepared and used for recording information, there were several techniques used for preserving the material. From the ancient period the common accepted method was using herbal extracts to prevent natural decay. Later on fumigation methods are followed and then people started using chemical methods in the modern world. Above all, digitization is accepted as the best practice for preserving the contents of the manuscripts. As a result, the available palm leaf manuscripts at institutions and homes, museums and special collections are have to be digitized and then they could provide access to their collection. Noolaham Foundation archive's project identifies digitizes and makes these works accessible to the wider scholarly community and the public.

A large number of digitization activities have been initiated in academic libraries in the developed as well as the developing world. The growing demand for digital access is having a profound impact on the roles of institutions such as museums and special collections libraries, and some personal. A number of projects have been launched in this connection in Sri Lanka by governments and institutions, but so far not in Jaffna and other Tamil speaking area. Now it is the duty of the present day Tamil speaking community to find out an acceptable solution to the preservation of the contents in the palm leaves manuscripts and other intellectual properties.

Objectives and Achievements / Results

The main objective of this project was to establish the Manuscripts Archive Program of the Noolaham Foundation.

The Endangered Archive Programme (EAP) is a program organized by the British Library to contribute to the preservation of archival material that is in danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration world-wide. The British Library, supported by Arcadia, supports various projects worldwide. Constituting a Digital Archive of Tamil Agrarian History, the EAP 458 project was being implemented based at French Institute of Pondicherry. The French Institute of Pondicherry and EAP 458 team had agreed to provide Noolaham Foundation's volunteers training and guidance in the areas of documentation and preservation.

Sivananthamoorthy Seran of Noolaham Foundation travelled to India, stayed with the EAP 458 team for a week. This training program lasted for a week and Seran was trained in documentation by photography, digitization and preservation. Dr. M. Kannan, Dr. Zoe Headley and Mr. Ponnarasu enabled this program and Dr. Ganesan, Rameshkumar, V. Krishnamoorthy, P.Chandran and V. Muthukumar provided the training.

Training programme schedule (tentative)

- S. Seran -

Date	Time	Programme
24.05.2012	2.00-5.30	Introduction
		Photography - Ramesh Kumar (finalized with Dr. Kannan)
25.05.2012	9.30-12.30	Photography - Ramesh Kumar (finalized with Dr. Kannan)
	12.30-2.00	Lunch
	2.00-5.30	Project Introduction; Discussuin on document collections & filed work activities
26.05.2012	9.30-12.30	Digitization process - demonstration
	12.30-2.00	Lunch
	2.00-5.30	Equipment assembling procedure (camera, stand, laptop etc.)
27.05.2012	9.30-12.30	Digitization process - Exercise (self learning)
	12.30-2.00	Lunch
	2.00-5.30	Visiting workshop to see the process of stand making (to be finalized by contacting Joseph)
28.05.2012	9.30-12.30	Conservation of documents (paper documents) - procedures and practices
	12.30-2.00	Lunch
	2.00-5.30	Conservation of documents (palmleaf documents) - procedures and practices
29.05.2012	9.30-12.30	Conservation of documents (copper plates) - procedures and practices
	12.30-2.00	Lunch
	2.00-5.30	Experience sharing and discussion
30.05.2012	9.30-12.30	
	12.30-2.00	
	2.00-5.30	

Through this project four of manuscript volumes (231 images) at Uduvil, Jaffna and five volumes at Sivakurunatha Kurupitam, Jaffna were digitized and they will be made available online through Noolaham Foundation's Digital Library at (www.noolaham.org). They are rare and endangered documents.

EAP 458 Team has provided us with a blueprint of their mobile scanning equipment as well. Once Seran returned from the training, we built one such equipment and have begun to test it. Through this project 4 manuscript volumes from Uduvil, Jaffna and 5 volumes from Sivakurunatha Kurupitam were digitized as test sample. These volumes were digitized following the guidance of the Endangered Archive Program. As we could not get any scholars who can read the content of these volumes, they were not made available online, but will be made available online along with the future projects of the Foundation.

Constrains / Challenges

- During the project period Noolaham foundation observed that there were not many persons who could read the native script which needed to be researched. This was true not only for Jaffna but for all other parts of Sri Lanka. Thus to get basic information (metadata information), rights about all collections seemed to be hard job.
- Noolaham Foundation started the process of digital archiving without good answers to questions like whether to archive all the available manuscripts, question about the property rights, data portability, inter-operability, platform independency, technological obsolescence, storage media to be used, etc. But NF believes whatever the questions and threats are, digital archiving is the commonly accepted and immediate remedy before the information seekers and information scientists to preserve the contents in palm leaves.
- During the project, challenges such as threats include dry weather, insects, dust, humidity and variations in temperature were observed. Measures are being taken to offset these factors, including attention to cleaning, but they still remain a significant challenge and they must be handled with the utmost care.

Suggestion and Recommendation:

- Adequate online metadata is an essential condition for good quality access to digitized versions of material. Minimal description is far better than none. NF should find a scholar who is an expert in manuscript management so he or she can classify, catalogue and evaluate manuscripts and facilitate their use by researchers. So basic information such as metadata and contents about all collections could be made available online.
- Special collections professionals should take the lead in researching and developing new forms of access and digital storage, and finding opportunities to apply them to special collections. The relevant institutions and other repositories need to make the necessary investment in technology to advance the creation of tools, and support their staff in taking this lead.
- During the project numerous risks were taken, but the reward is that the images can now be used for research and teaching purposes.
- Still there are a large number of palm leaves manuscripts in many parts of Jaffna lying un-identified. Organizations should work together to build a consortia based sharing resources using the digital image technology.

- The identified palm leaf manuscripts need to be published in modern media. There needs to be a basic system to recollect these misplaced, scattered and hidden materials. In addition, NF needs a space where such materials could be made available for researchers and inventors. Noolaham Foundation will also involve in identifying repositories in Sri Lanka, and make arrangement in the respective location to digitize.
- Noolaham Foundation will have to provide awareness creation through continuous lobbying. It needs to facilitate manuscripts holders to continuously provide support in the collection of documents, to obtain permission and approvals from respective contributors, and to seek help from all relevant stakeholders such as scholars to digitalize and archive relevant documents.
- In Jaffna, palm leaf manuscripts have not been explored and researched. Therefore, all the repositories have to do something by increasing trained staff, fund allocation, and enhance studies related to this field and then the problems could be solved.
- Digitizing palm leaf documents has a large set of challenges associated with it. They need to be handled with enormous care as they are delicate and irreplaceable. As of now, the palm leaves are being photographed one at a time, but better methods have to be invented to improve the rate and quality of digitization. Better scanners have to be designed for this purpose, which can take high definition colour images of the palm leaves while causing no damage to the bundle.