

## **Preservation and Conservation of Palm Leaf Manuscripts**

**Collected from Mingin District, Sagaing Region**



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## ABSTRACT

The holdings of libraries, museums, archives, and other documentation centres are the priceless heritage of mankind. Not only in the context ancient lore but also in the context of medieval and modern age, manuscripts are considered as the most important source of authenticity. The manuscripts constitute the most precious national and cultural heritage. Thus preservation and conservation of manuscripts is a serious issue for librarians, archivist and scholars. As the National library of Myanmar is the ‘National Centre for the Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Manuscripts’, she has been very proud of taking the responsibilities of housing, collecting, taking inventory, preserving and conserving of Myanmar traditional manuscripts as the national literary heritage of the country for many years. In this paper an attempt has been made to summarize the collecting of palm leaf manuscripts in Sagaing Region, Upper Myanmar.

## Introduction

Palm leaf manuscripts are one of the earliest forms of written media that bears a prominent place among the historical sources on Myanmar national cultural heritage. Until the advent of the printed papers, Palm leaf manuscripts served primary function on the Buddhist doctrine and canonical literature. Preservation of information was also considered important within the Buddhist tradition as Buddhist monks were concerned in preservation of teachings of Buddha from mouth to year tradition. Accordingly, under the patronage of kings and the guidance of Buddhist monk's information that in form of Buddhist scriptures passed orally from generation to generation were documented, in the 1st century B.C. This decisive step of preservation of teachings of Buddha in palm leaf manuscripts would have been taken not only due to the difficulty in protecting the authenticity of the orally transmitted Buddhist knowledge.

Unfortunately life span of palm leaf manuscripts are rather shorter and vulnerable to natural and manmade disasters when compared to the other media chosen for preservation of information. Therefore, the available manuscripts are barely older than two or three centuries. A search through of palm leaf collections in Myanmar reveal that these manuscripts not only played a major role in preservation of Buddhist scriptures and classical literature but also took part significant responsibility in carrying forward a tradition that significantly influenced to preserve Myanmar traditional knowledge.

The present paper aims to explore modes of providing access and measures of preservation of Palm-leaf manuscripts carried out in National Library of Myanmar in the light of both traditional preservation and modern digital technological environments.

## Nature of Palm leaf Manuscripts

Palm-leaf manuscripts are produced from two main types of palms: palmyra, and talipot. The palmyra leaf is rather thick and inflexible, inclined towards brittleness over time. The talipot is thinner and more flexible, with excellent lasting qualities, reportedly for as long as 600 years. Although there is often some variation in size in different areas, palm-leaf manuscripts seem to average 48 centimetres in length and 4 centimetres in width. There is a considerable range of "book" thicknesses. Each "book" or bundle of leaves is usually fastened together with braided cords threaded through two holes pierced through the entire body of the manuscripts about 4 centimetres from each end or by the insertion of bamboo splints. The resultant "binding" is finished by the addition of heavy wooden covers at the front and the back, also tied by the braided cords or wrapped with webbing. There are generally two techniques used for writing on the manuscripts: through incisions with a pointed stylus, and by writing directly with a pen or brush. Most of the manuscripts that encountered in Myanmar have been incised, with occasional additions or emendations written by pen on the surface. Incised writing is made visible by the application of a mixture of lampblack and oil,



















