



Preservation and Conservation (PAC) Programme Frequently Asked Questions

Traditional paper and manuscript preservation

Prepared by PAC Sri Lanka

Q: What are the traditional materials used for writing in Sri Lanka?

A: Traditionally, a metal stylus was used to write on Ola leaves or Palm leaves to create manuscripts.

Q: When did this tradition begin in Sri Lanka?

A: According to the historical records, the writing on palm leaves began in the 3rd century BCE. This tradition faded away in 18th century ACE, after the introduction of the printing press to the Sri Lanka by Colonial Dutch government.

Q: Are these manuscripts prepared using real tree leaves?

A: Yes, this traditional method of writing uses leaves from the *Corypha umbraculifera* (Ola) and *Borassus unbraculifera* (Palm) trees.

Q: What is the traditional method to prepare these manuscripts?

A: The leaves are cut from the tree and then the segments are separated. The middle rib is removed. Ola leaves are then rolled, dipped in water and boiled gently with unripe papaya pulp and pineapple leaves. This process softens them and makes the leaf fibre flexible.

The leaves are left in the sun to dry for several days. The processed leaves are stored in kitchen within the stove hood, where the wood smoke adds to the durability of the processed leaves.

Finally, the leaf is polished by running strips back and forth on a smooth cylinder of areca palm tree until a smooth surface is obtained. Now the leaf is ready be written upon.

Q: What instrument is used to write on the palm leaf manuscripts?

A: The traditional writing instrument is the metal tylus (Panhinda)

Q: What sort of contents would typically be written on palm leaf manuscripts in ancient Sri Lanka?

A: Palm leaf manuscripts were written on various subjects such as Buddhism, history, astrology, traditional medicine, traditional architecture, science and technology, traditional knowledge and practices, and other wide-ranging topics.

Q: What are some specific conservation problems that are typical of palm leaf manuscripts?

A: Typical challenges for conservation of these manuscripts include:

- Stains on the palm leaf
- Fungal or mould growth
- Insect damage
- Brittleness and cracking of leaves
- Leaves become stuck together.

Q: What are examples of treatments which can be used for conservation of Palm leaf manuscripts?

A: We have observed that some traditional and modern treatments normally used for paper-based material are effective. Treatment should be undertaken by a trained conservator.

Q: Can you explain what traditional treatments consist of?

A: The National Library of Sri Lanka uses a special oil made through the distillation of *Vateria copallifera* resins to treat the palm leaf manuscripts. This oil is mixed with charcoal powder and applied to the palm leaf surface by cotton cloth. Excess oil is then wiped away.

Mixed with black charcoal, the oil increases the contrast of the letters. In addition, the oil makes the palm leaf more flexible and is a known fungicide, anti-bacterial and deleterious to insects' larvae. this oil twice a year has been seen to minimise the deterioration process of palm leaf manuscripts.