

Palm leaf manuscript culture in Sri Lanka

Piyadasa Ranasinghe¹

Palm leaf, also known as Ola leaf, has been the chief writing material as well as the principal carrier of knowledge in Sri Lanka from early Anuradhapura period to 20th century, for more than 2300 years. Even in this digital era writing on palm leaves for special purpose is still exists.

The present study, based on the examination of archival data as well as manuscripts themselves, is an attempt to identify the palm leaf manuscript culture which formed the intellectual backbone of the nation. Manuscript culture can be defined as a sub set of main culture which involves in the production, distribution, collection and preservation of manuscripts and practices and beliefs pertaining to these activities. Invariably it is influenced by the main culture and vice versa.

In Sri Lanka palm leaves have been in use as single leaves for writing short messages and notes and as bounded set of leaves gathered together with a strong thread to form a book. Both sides of the book were protected by two wooden plates usually decorated with coloured illustrations.

The study revealed that there was a set of practices and beliefs that can be termed as palm leaf manuscript culture. Processing of raw palm leaves into flexible and durable writing material has resulted in a specific art and craft. Growing palm trees and economical use of leaves with clear ecological concerns, specific writing system to write on palm leaves, training of copyists, copying profession, book cover decorative art, preservation techniques of manuscript books and institutions to collect them and the social role of manuscripts are some of the features of this culture.

It was observed that the prevailing listening tradition- the inevitable outcome of the oral tradition- was further strengthened by this manuscript culture. Respect for books in Sri Lankan culture is also due to the impact of manuscript subculture which personified Dhamma in book format on a par with Buddha and Sangha. At the beginning palm leaf manuscripts that recorded Dhamma became sacred objects and later the same notion seeped into other types of manuscript books also.

Bibliographic control of manuscript books or the dissemination of bibliographic details of such books to interested users has also been a part of this culture. Standard of the description consisted of fivefold elements, viz., author, title, cause (reason for writing), extent and use. Although the manuscripts books were not for sale as today, there was a system similar to modern book publishing in which copyists did the role of printer and sponsors played the role of publisher.

Certain folk beliefs and folk tales associated with palm leaf manuscript culture are also found and in general the subject needs multi- faceted investigations.

Key words: *Manuscript culture, Palm leaf manuscripts, Ola leaf manuscripts, Sri Lanka*