

IDENTIFICATION OF PHYSICAL PROBLEMS OF MAJOR PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTIONS IN SRI LANKA

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A survey of the largest collection of palm-leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka was carried out by using 3 repositories; those of the National Museum(NM), University of Peradeniya(UP) and the National Archive(NA). This survey was aimed at investigating the maintenance problems, flaws and problems of conservation of the collections, and to find out the existing preservation programmes in the country. The research instruments used were visual observation recorded in a record sheet, and the survey method applied to check the physical condition of the manuscripts. A Heads of departments/librarian addressed to questionnaire was also used to identify administrative problems. Interviews with conservation staff were carried out to gather information on the preservation programmes and staff training.

About 10% of each collection was selected by using a simple random sampling method, and a sample consisted of 717 manuscripts. Statistical Package for Social Sciences was used for data analysis.

The visual survey revealed that most flaws in manuscripts have taken place due to a lack of awareness, and of experts in the field, including insufficient equipment to control the hazards of some repositories. NM & UP lack space to maintain the collections. Dust, insects and lack of wooden boards are common defects in all collections. The survey revealed that the highest number of stains (17.02%), fungi (27.65%) and average Relative Humidity during the period of study was 80.46-82.41% in the UP repository, insect damaging (29.58%) and water damage of the palm-leaves, due to non availability of air condition in the NM repository. Highest surface discoloration was found in the UP repository (48.93%). Split or peeling of the surface (20.74%), brittleness (19.68%), leaves rigid/flexible (12.76%) were caused due to wide variations in temperature and moisture in the environment of the UP repository. UP has stuck leaves (11.20%) and NM has cleavage of surface (8.11%) due to many manuscripts being stored in bundles. The UP repository needs (62.5%) boards and NA needs the highest amount of cotton yarn (87.5%). The survey revealed that, only NM & NA are equipped with conservation units while UP have a binding unit where no modern techniques are being applied. Staff of the NM and NA repositories has undergone preservation and conservation training at "The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage- Indian Conservation Institute" in 1999-2002. This 4 month training provided enough practical training in modern techniques.

The significant finding is the need for a workable preservation policy and conservation departments to prevent further damage. Air-conditioners, de-humidifiers, suitable lights for the repositories are the basic requirements. Every repository should undertake at least one fumigation method to destroy all traces of micro-organisms. This requires implementing the advisory services and management, and it should be planned as a joint venture between the librarians, archivists and the technicians of the repositories.